

THE MAGPIE'S NEST

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SHADOW RIDERS

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The
MAGPIE'S NEST

BY
ISABEL PATERSON
AUTHOR OF "THE SHADOW RIDERS"

"Le bonheur est un grand peut-être; et peut se
trouver dans un nid de pie"

(French Proverb)

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TO
H. M. K.



THE MAGPIE'S NEST

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PART I

THE COCKLE-SHELL

CHAPTER I

IN a hollow sheltered under the brow of one of the million hills which undulate away from the dark flanks of the Northern Rockies, couched in the yellow grass like a hare in its form, a girl child lay with her chin propped on her hands, and stared at the rippled surface of the slough below her. She had been reading, but her books were closed. Now she was thinking.

Her thoughts oppressed her, for she was a silent child. She had no one to talk to about some things. People laughed at her, or looked impatient, or puzzled. This was because she knew a great many words whose finer meanings she had not yet mastered, and she would bring them out tentatively, solemnly, in disjointed sentences that were either senseless for lack of a spoken context or priggish and irritating. These efforts meeting with no response, she would then retire into silence again. The flower of childhood, the fruit of maturity, are equally pleasant, but green apples set the teeth on edge. Hope Fielding was at an age where she set people's teeth on edge. She was over twelve, but looked no more than ten.

She had two books with her. One was a waste of words written by some earnest zealot who in his elucidation of religion had stripped it to the repulsive skeleton of dogma. Her hard, exacting young mind, seeking in it for something tangible, had quite naturally captured all its absurdities, but she was not old enough to have more than a very rudimentary sense of humour, so instead of being amused she was bored and repelled.

She turned away from it, and slipped insensibly into a daydream, that dangerous poppyfield of the imaginative and lonely soul. There is no visible horizon on the prairies. Earth and sky melt together with a suggestion of infinity. This is soothing to the adult mind, which seeks in religion for the patience of eternity to soothe the tedium of time. But children look for an answer to very personal questions, and the infinite only throws them back on themselves. If they are not then satisfied with things as they are, their only recourse is to remake them with a daydream. Childhood is often a time of great perplexity and trouble, because it can look neither forward nor back, and if the universe is not immediately right, it is not right at all.

This day Hope made her dream out of another book. It was the story of Mary Stuart. Out of it, like a magic casket, she brought strange treasure of rich tapestries and bright brocaded velvets, lovely and too-much-loved ladies and brave gentlemen with jewel-hilted swords—all the worn trappings of romance, which to her were still fresh and untarnished. She thrust aside the barrier of facts and years and distance, and arrayed herself magnificently, in crimson vair and rubies and high-heeled little shoes of gold, to tread a measure at Holyrood. It was because she really could think like that, in just such stilted phrases, that her remarks were at times either Delphic or

absurd. There is nothing hackneyed to twelve years old.

It was such a beautiful word—Holyrood. She did not know exactly what vair might be, but that also was a beautiful word. She crooned them over to herself, feeling as if she were slipping bright beads one by one over a strand of silk. Meanwhile, she pulled down her brown cotton frock to cover her brown knees. They were otherwise bare, and scratched by the wild rose thorns. Her fine, fawn-coloured hair was unbound, and when it blew into her eyes she shook her head impatiently. Her eyes were cloudy blue, with quick dilating pupils; she had a straight, unwinking gaze, which, with the two fine lines already apparent between her crescent eyebrows, gave her a proud and untamable look quite at variance with the rest of her features, which still had the unformed softness of babyhood. She was thin and tanned, instead of plump and rosy; she was altogether ungracious and shy, not only a green apple but a wilding.

The sun told her she had been out for hours. And she had gone far, and was weary. Her dreams scattered, settling to earth like a flock of tired birds. She rose and went slowly over the long tawny grass. It was the colour of her hair, and the sky on this uncertain day was the colour of her eyes. The grass rippled in the steady, dry soft wind, in low running waves like the surface of the water, an illimitable sea of grass, unbroken by fences or dwellings. The wind was not cold, but it went on and on monotonously. The spring and autumn winds always made her feel listless and out of tune with life. June was the month she loved, when the moist earth seemed to send up its juices to refresh her blood.

Then the sky stooped very near, a wonderful deep azure, with clouds of the texture of white wool drift-

ing just above the hilltops. And then the herbage, the very earth itself, diffused a thin, fine perfume, an exquisite, clean, living scent. The wind had long since beaten out that perfume and borne it away.

Hope was apparently all alone in the centre of a vast unpeopled reach of yellow grass and pale blue sky. Very far off and dim were the mountains. She meant some day to go and see what was beyond them.

Yet, when she topped the rise which gave her a sight of home, and beheld saddled horses which betokened strange guests, standing patiently at the corral, she hesitated a long ten minutes and then made a wide detour, coming into the house by the kitchen door.

The kitchen was bare, clean scrubbed, full of a cheerful warmth and intimacy which radiated from the bubbling teakettle on the stove as a centre. Hope came in quietly, as she always did, and stopped stock-still, seeing herself not only forestalled but excessively superfluous. Her oldest sister, Nellie, was washing the dishes, which Hope should have done hours before. A young man was drying them. Nellie was a young lady, which meant that to Hope she was infinitely more removed than a stranger. The young man greeted Hope. He came to the house very often, but she responded only with a shy jerk of her head, and went on into the living-room, which she had not meant to do.

Only her mother's eyes greeted her there. Three strangers were talking to her father. She sidled into a corner, flanked by a tall cupboard press, and sat on a small box which held all her own most personal belongings.

In another corner her three younger sisters sat cutting pictures out of an old magazine. They whispered together, and sometimes looked up shyly at the guests. Her brother, the only boy in the family, identified himself with the men by sitting close to her

father and listening intently and unabashed, after the manner of boys. He was fifteen, and did a man's work. Hope was the odd one, unaccompanied.

"Yes," her father spoke to a grave, bearded man, "I know the outcrop you mean. I get our own coal there. I think you'll be disappointed. The vein's no more than two feet thick, and shaley. What use would it be, anyway, so far from a railroad?"

"We should go deeper," said the bearded man, speaking with authority. "There was a test boring made here years ago—I made it myself, in fact. But, as you say, it was no use without a railway. Now it's no secret that the steel will be here within three years—the Whitewater branch. All you old-timers will only have to sit tight, and the railway will make you rich." He was an official high up in the councils of the railroad; in a manner he was offering a return for hospitality.

"Rich?" said Jared Fielding, dubiously. "You mean it will bring in a lot of fool farmers, and our range will be gone, and we'll have to go on again."

Fielding was a pathmaker, not a moneymaker, a man whose life had been spent as a feather poised on the edge of a flood, ever ready to advance yet further ahead of the incoming tide of civilisation. In his youth he had loved solitudes, and desired breathing space. Now he felt the reluctance of middle age to innovation and change. The bearded man smiled sympathetically. He understood the spirit of such men. With a stake and chain he had surveyed these very acres years before; the test boring he had mentioned was a veritable landmark in his own life.

Conroy Edgerton, the second guest, looked mildly impatient. His smooth-shaven countenance was shrewd, yet immature, a good type of the successful American business man. There was intelligence rather

than intellect in his eyes; he had the well-padded frame of a man who understands the economics, if not the æsthetics, of living well; a type evolved of the quick prosperity of the Middle West. He had come on his own business, land speculation.

The third stranger was the youngest, hardly more than a boy. He showed to Hope a clean profile, faintly Romanesque but stopping short of the too aquiline nose. Hope liked him best because his skin was a clear brown, darker than his yellow hair, not pink like Edgerton's, nor weatherbeaten like the railway man's. He had bright blue eyes, and a figure so well-knit and compact that it saved him from looking insignificant. Hope stealthily reached for a pencil and tried to sketch him on the fly-leaf of her book, while the conversation rumbled on pleasantly. He very obligingly sat silent. He was thinking of his cousin, whose marriage he must hurry on to Philadelphia to attend within the month; he had come from the other side of the world for that purpose. Having no sisters, he thought of his cousin Grace rather in the light of one—a pale, slim, clever girl. Her letter had been insistent. But there was time to stop for a week's hunting. The railway man was a very distant connection of his family.

For all the young man's stillness, Hope failed to fix him on paper. She spoiled many blank scraps with childish sketches, which showed manual facility, a very small talent possibly, but nothing more. Her pencil ran most easily to the making of fat brownies, squirrels, and funny baby faces with ducktail curls on top of their heads, such as her plump, blonde little sister had worn no long time before. It would not serve for the severe lines of Norris Carter's chin and brow. So she listened again perfunctorily, while Edgerton made a forecast of the financial future of the country.

It did not interest her. She knew her father would never be rich; and she could not imagine that vast, lonely country as ever suffering any change.

The young man saw her suddenly, peering bright-eyed from her dim corner, and he smiled at her. She flushed, with a quick movement drawing down her short skirt, as if she would cover her bare feet. How could any young man dream that if her fancy had been armed with magic for fulfilment she would have stood before him in a courtly gown with a three-yard train and given him her hand to kiss! That tanned, grubby little fist—she flushed deeper, looking down at it despairingly. But when Edgerton also saw her, she reverted suddenly to her true age. He was the kind of man one expected to produce bonbons from mysterious pockets.

Following their eyes, her father's glance rested on her at last.

"Did you come home for a visit, Hope?" he rallied her. "Mother said you went out right after breakfast."

"I w-went up to the beaverpond," she explained, shrinking under the three pairs of eyes focussed on her. "They—they've built a new dam. And I saw a bear-track. He'd been fishing. So I went around—I went a long way."

"Beaver—and bears?" Carter roused to attention.

"Three or four beaver," Fielding explained. "It's several miles from here, up the creek, where there's brush. Last of the Mohicans, I guess."

"Aren't you afraid," asked the railway man, raising his grizzled eyebrows, "to let that baby run about so far from home? I didn't think there were any bear left, either."

"Oh, maybe once or twice a year one wanders down from the foothills," said Fielding indifferently. "Lit-

tle fellows; they run if they smell a man. We'd have to tie these young scamps by the leg if we wanted to keep them at home. Maybe it wasn't a bear-track, anyway; probably she made it herself last week." His auditors laughed. Hope felt the miserable sensation attendant on speech out of season, commoner to adolescents than to her own age. She shut her lips tightly, and waited for a chance of escape.

But after the noon dinner, when the guests arose to depart, Edgerton found her in the kitchen, and put a heavy silver dollar in her hand, closing her palm on it tightly.

"Buy yourself some gumdrops," he said confidentially.

"T-thank you," she said, stuttering with shyness. "But I can't; there is no store here."

"That's too bad," he said seriously. "Would you get anything sent you by mail?"

And when she told him that she would, that mail came once a week, he warned her to be on the watch.

"But I like ch-chocolates best," she put in eagerly. And she held out the dollar to him.

He laughed, deep down in his chest.

"No, no; that's yours now; keep it."

Then they all saw, and laughed at her again, and she fled. Edgerton only smiled kindly. He thought she must be about the age of his own girl. Hope hid the money in her box when they had gone. It seemed a great sum, but she could not think of a suitable way to spend it.

An atmosphere of solemnity enveloped the house. In spite of her tendency to be oblivious of surroundings, Hope felt it. She followed her mother about for a time, expectantly. In the evening, when the lamp was lit, she forgot for a while, poring again over her book, until she became aware of her parents talking

apart, seriously and in low tones. Sometimes they addressed Nellie. Hope lost herself in naïve contemplation, as a child does when shut out of a group. Her brother, across the table, also fixed his gaze on the elder three. The youngest girls had been sent to bed. Then the mother observed their wonder and spoke, while Nellie looked confused and rosy.

Nellie was going to be married!

The two children looked equally surprised and bewildered. Mrs. Fielding's eyes were misty. She was nearing fifty, yet her life had gone by like a dream. To find Nellie grown to marriageable age astonished her also. She had transmuted hope into indomitable patience; yet she wished she might accept every hardship that could befall her children, and assure them of unalloyed happiness. No doubt Martha was a mother.

The parents took up again the discussion of the more practical details of Nellie's future. Hope gradually crept closer and held to her mother's sleeve. With a start her father bethought him that it was past bedtime, but that timid, insistent clutch moved her mother first to take Hope onto her lap for a few minutes. The child snuggled her tawny head on the deep, soft bosom that had suckled her, with a feeling of some old grief comforted.

"I wish my girls didn't have to marry," she heard her mother murmur absently, thinking aloud. Mrs. Fielding wanted to lift her own children, on her own shoulders, if need be, above the level flood of the commonplace. But she did not even know that was her meaning. Hope reflected with difficulty, because sleep was overtaking her. Did girls have to marry? If there was something else they could do, what was it? If she went—over the mountains—she might find out— Her mother would approve.

"Oh, mamma," said Nellie gaily, not at all reproach-

fully, "do you want me to be an old maid? Why, next birthday I'll be twenty!"

She swooped down on her mother and hugged her, dislodging Hope, setting them all laughing with the infection of her own joyousness. But Hope, rubbing her eyes and laughing also, put away her resolution very much as she had the silver.

Two weeks later came a great beflowered box of chocolates, tied with a yard of satin ribbon, from Edgerton. Hope put the ribbon on her hair, shared the chocolates impartially, and put her doll in the box. She could not write and thank the donor, because he had sent no address. But the gift meant a great deal to her. It meant that life might be lavish, unexpected and wonderful, like a fairy-tale. To the end of her days gifts gave her that same unreasoning pleasure. It was one of her most endearing traits.

CHAPTER II

NO one knew better than Hope that the rickety dresser atop of which she perched had a castor loose and must not be tempted by even one unwary wriggle. So she sat very still, almost holding her breath, confining her skirts with a hand on either side. The faded blue silk kerchief worn as a dusting cap, the cross-over bib apron and slim ankles, revealed by a treacherously short skirt, made her look not unlike a rustic Dresden figurine set there for ornament. Even her incongruously dainty buckled shoes helped the illusion, though they did not assort with the cotton frock she had not dared to change to run the gauntlet of the housekeeper's eye. Besides, she had not a better frock, but the shoes she could not have done without. She had that *flair* for dressing; she knew the essential points.

So she sat, waiting and watching Evan Hardy, who smoked a cigarette and laughed at her. The fear of a tumble did not deter her, but there was no assurance that she would alight feet first, in the approved manner of cats and young ladies. And that was quaintly characteristic of Hope, since she was in Evan Hardy's room, and he had himself placed her in her elevated position.

"What are you thinking of?" he questioned her idly.

"You," she said gravely. "I wonder——"

"What?"

"You won't tell me." She felt very sure of that.

"I will if you'll give me a kiss."

"I want to get down, please."

"Come down, then. And I'll tell you anything you like," he promised, holding out his arms to her.

She slipped into them. He carried her to a chair.

"Now, what do you want to know?"

Curled up in his arms like a kitten, she rubbed her cheek ingratiatingly against his silk *négligé* shirt. He smelled pleasantly of Florida water and talcum powder, which was agreeable to her. His face was the fine oval sometimes seen in the healthy Englishman of good lineage—he was half-Cornish, half-Irish. He had crisp, clean-looking brown hair, blue eyes, the mouth of a young lover. There was nothing evil in his face anywhere, nor in his heart. Neither was there anything great. Years afterward, when Time had swallowed him, Hope was conscious of a certain affectionate gratitude toward him, half for what he was, half for what he was not. But then she was seventeen, and quite unaware of cause for gratitude.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

"Not very," she answered, squirming slightly. "I've got a crick in my neck."

"Don't you like to sit on my knee?"

"No."

"Why? Don't you like me?"

"Oh, yes—sure I do. But I don't much like being touched."

"Nor kissed?"

"No one ever kissed me but you."

"No schoolboy sweethearts?"

But he believed her when she said: "Never had any."

"Don't you like that?" He kissed her.

At his first kiss, no long time before, she had thought the earth slipping from beneath her feet. In some strange way it had reached her imaginative spirit and left her blood unquickenied; there was all romance

and nothing of passion in it. Her temperament was still too closely sheathed in its northern ice to wake to one kiss. But when she thought of it still it had power to arrest her mind and hold her, dreamy-eyed, with caught breath, her white teeth denting her lower lip, remembering it and the hours she had spent afterward in her room alone, with her face hidden in a pillow, still conscious of the soft pressure of his mouth on hers. What was still more strange, now his caresses left her cool and a trifle petulant; she endured them only for liking's sake. Evan did not want to trouble her, only to understand. So he asked:

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No." There was very little that Hope was afraid of.

"What, then?"

"I want to know," she burst out, with plaintive despair, "why you like to kiss me!" And indeed, she did. "It—it bores me, rather. You seem to like it. Why?"

"Good Lord!" He stared, a picture of amazement. "Bores you—— Why do you come here?" But that he said very gently, for he had always known that women were not mere automatons, responding only to one emotion, and at the will of a man. It was fascinating to see her struggle to express herself.

"I told you," she said impatiently, unembarrassed. "I like you; and you asked me. Where else can I see you? I want someone to—to play with."

So he had guessed.

"You said you'd tell me," she reminded him, sighing against his shoulder.

"Well," he said at last, "you are—sweet, you know."

"But," she got to her point laboriously, "you like to kiss girls?"

This was the difficult point; she felt cheated. Prince Charming woke the Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, and by that she knew him for the true Prince. It was the countersign of love, no less. But Evan did not love her! She did not especially want him to, but it was disconcerting to find the sign false! As for the romantic alternative—that he must be a villain—— She smiled, her delightful secretive smile, which so seldom accorded with any outward occasion. And he did misunderstand that for a moment. Very firmly and gently he held her and kissed her again and again, soft kisses, but with fire beneath them, until she could feel her cold mouth grow warm to them, and the blood beating in her throat. His heart fluttered, too, close against hers.

"Does that bore you?" he asked in a queer, tense voice.

She put her hands to his breast and thrust him away, crimson, confused, shaken.

"Oh," she said, "I—don't *like* you to do that." There were tears in her eyes.

"Why, you baby child," he set her down hastily and crossed to the window, looking out into the windy, dusty dark. "Don't cry, dear; I won't." He looked disproportionately ashamed and sorry. "Have some chocolates." He turned to find them.

Laughter welled up in her at his propitiatory offering, and he spun about and looked at her again.

"You're a bit of a devil, too," he said, his teeth flashing. "But I'll be good!"

"Do you like to kiss *any* girl?" She held to it, with the frightful persistency of youth.

"O Lord," he said again, almost prayerfully. "No, not just any girl. What a reputation! Nice ones—yes, I do like to kiss 'em."

"Can you remember them all?" she pursued.

"All the girls I've kissed? My word, what a funny child you are! No, I don't suppose I can. They were nice girls, anyway."

"How many?" Hope yearned for something definite, in this welter of things as they ought to be and things as they were.

"Tell you I don't know. Millions!" He was laughingly desperate.

"Well, but—why?" That was it, and she wanted to pin him down to it.

"Because—— Oh, if you will be a little tease, I'll kiss you again!"

No doubt, he reflected, someone would put the key of the Bluebeard's chamber in her hands, and soon, but it was not for him. There was nothing morbid nor unhealthy about him, none of the *blasé* spirit which delights in wanton destruction. He was exceedingly glad she had not understood a little earlier. He drew a long breath of relief that the moment had gone past. She was watching him wistfully.

"I knew you wouldn't tell me——"

He caught her up suddenly, smothering her words against his shoulder.

"Hush—sh!"

Someone rapped sharply on the door. He carried her across the room, and when he drew the door half-open she was behind it, breathless, rather elated and amused, holding her skirts again, lest a ruffle should peep out. Almost against her ear a masculine voice spoke:

"Coming down for a game of pool before we turn in, Hardy?"

"In five minutes or so," said Evan agreeably, but casually barring the way. "Pick up Jim Sanderson; I'll be there."

"Oh, Sanderson?"

There was an accent of doubt in the voice, and something more, a familiar ring—who? where? when? Hope had heard it before, but none of these questions could she answer.

"Oh, I owe him a drink," said Evan, half apologetic.

"All right," said the invisible one, and Hope heard quick, even footsteps retreating down the hall.

Evan shut the door and looked at her, his eyes twinkling despite himself.

"Close call, young lady," he said. "And, anyway, time little girls were in bed. You know you mustn't stay after ten."

"Who was that?" she demanded, ignoring his reminder of his own rule—a quite extraordinary rule, but one which it had suited him to make.

"Conroy Edgerton, the big land man," said Evan. "Curious one, why do you want to know?"

"I knew it," she nodded solemnly, not heeding him. "What's he doing here?"

"Rigging up some deal. He's starting a big company North, you know; got concessions from the Sleepy R. I met him in Winnipeg last year. Anything else?"

"Good night," she said, and began edging past him.

"Having pumped me dry, the young lady has no further use for me," he complained. "Come here, you Mighty Atom!" He had her fast. "Now, you give me one. You've never kissed me yet."

Millions of girls—millions of kisses! But she had done with the subject for the moment, her mind being on the weighty matter of a box of chocolates. So she said "Yes," stood on tiptoe to frame his obediently bent head with her palms, and kissed him on the mouth.

"You *are* a baby," he said. "With your mouth shut—like that! Never mind, you're a dear. Good night, child."

She slid out, squeezing through the partly opened

door like a mouse through a crack, and vanished down the hall, a moving blue shadow, past the housekeeper's room, safe in her own tiny cubicle, after a momentary pause at Agnes's door. The transom was dark; Agnes was either asleep or philandering. Hope did not care for the other one, Belle, who was fat and loud-voiced. She went to bed, suppressing her desire for a feminine conference. And, since she must rise at six, she slept the sleep of the unjust within five minutes after her head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER III

BELLE, the fat waitress, lay abed with acute indigestion, groaning, and below Hope took her place. She stood behind the screen which sheltered the kitchen door, yawning delicately, for it was not yet seven o'clock, and watching for the early comers to the dining-room. They, too, yawned and rubbed their eyes, and looked disconsolate and lonely in the big room, seated before desert-like expanses of more or less white linen. Agnes swayed to and fro along the cocoa-matting lane between the two rows of tables, moving with the grace of a Greek girl bearing an amphora upon her shoulder instead of a lacquered tin tray. Agnes was slender and black-eyed, with cheek bones of a betraying prominence; she had a certain graciousness of manner that disarmed even the hardest commercial traveller; and the early ones sought her tables. Hope drew her behind the screen a moment.

"If a big man, in a grey suit and a white waistcoat, comes in, will you please let me take his order?" she asked confidentially.

Agnes was in haste, and nodded a "yes," not stopping to reason why.

Immediately the big man came in, pink-faced and fresh and yawnless, and sat at one of Hope's own tables, in a retired corner near one of the long windows. His waistcoat shamed the linen desert, and the early sunlight glittered on a diamond in his tie.

"Beefsteak—pork chops—hamaneggs—teaorcoffee?" Hope murmured timidly over his shoulder.

There were other words on her tongue, but she waited to see if any gleam of recognition lighted his eye. It did not. She retreated, and returned with such viands as he designated. The other early ones were leaving; there was always a lull between the very early and the chronically late. Hope sat in the window and watched him attack his beefsteak, drawing the white muslin curtains about her, and looking out from between them like a little nun from her white coif. He was quite aware of it, and waited until the door had closed on the last of the other breakfasters. Then, seeing him about to speak, she forestalled him.

"Thank you for the chocolates," she murmured gently.

"The what?" he remarked, slightly overcome, and giving the beefsteak a moment's truce.

"The chocolates." Hope spoke very firmly, despite her unconquerable blushes. She still blushed and stuttered when she most wished to preserve a calm and matter-of-fact demeanour. "I got them. I wanted to write, but there was no address. It's five years ago, but I remember it distinctly."

"Five years ago?" He looked properly apologetic.

"You stopped at our house, on Whitewater Creek, with two other men. I wasn't very big then."

"I should say," remarked Edgerton, resuscitating the memory with difficulty, "that you aren't very big now. You—why, yes, I do remember you. And what are you doing here?"

"I brought your breakfast," she reminded him.

"You did." He looked at it in confirmation. "But tell me all about it."

"I'm working here. Usually I'm upstairs. The other waitress is sick this morning. I have to work, you know."

"Do you?" He seemed genuinely interested. "Do you like it here?"

"It isn't so bad. Of course I'm not going to stay for ever."

"Where are you going from here?"

Hope was quite ready to chatter when she had so good an audience.

"To Normal School. I had to earn the money to go. I want to teach drawing. I finished High School last year; I stayed with my sister Nell. But there isn't any Normal School there, so I had to earn money to pay my board."

"Where are your parents?" He was thinking of his own daughter. "Are they still at Whitewater?"

"Yes. But I wanted to do this. I have four sisters and only one brother. That is too many girls."

"That's right. You're a plucky kid. Do you like chocolates yet?"

"M-mm," she nodded.

"Where can I see you? I'd like to talk things over a little."

She reflected. Where could she see anyone, except here in the public dining-room? Evan was an exception. He was "only Evan." So Agnes said, and Agnes was always right. Agnes was twenty-two and had much understanding of men. Hope meant to extract that fund of information some time, but hitherto embarrassment had overcome her on approaching the topic. She could only ask guidance on specific occasions.

"Do you want to see me? Why?"

She became a living interrogation mark, her eyes pointing it.

He laughed, the laugh she remembered.

"Heavens, child, I won't hurt you. Maybe I can help you. You don't look suited to this." His glance

comprehended the dining-room, passed through its walls, encompassed the hotel, included the town contemptuously.

"Well"—she considered—"there's a little balcony, upstairs—the third floor, off the hall. No one goes there. No one could see me, after dinner. If you like——"

"All right. At eight o'clock?"

"Eight-thirty," she offered. "We have to wash the silver and glass after dinner." She made a *moue* at the task.

"Just as you say." He drew out a thin gold watch and consulted it. "I guess my car will be waiting. I must go. Good heavens, I forget your name!"

"Hope Fielding."

"Do you mind——"

"I'll spell it," she laughed, and did so. She was used to comments on her name.

"To-night, then, Miss Fielding," he said courteously.

She reflected that most of the men who came to the hotel would have instantly and unceremoniously used her first name. He went out, his face stiffening into a mask at the last moment, as Agnes re-entered. The significance of it was lost on her. With him it was not quite instinctive, but second nature, for he had a genial soul. He had gained large possessions, and, instead of them bringing him ease withal, he must be perpetually on the defensive to keep them. It was indiscreet, he knew, to have made the appointment at all, for he feared women possibly more than men, but he had made his money as much by his understanding of human nature as by his foresight in the matter of practical opportunities. In a country where any man might become rich, and yet not all might, it had been necessary for him to know whom he could trust. And he knew there is a splendid recklessness about the young

which makes them worthy of confidence. They have not learned to weigh advantages against good faith. No, he was quite sure of Hope, even though he did not quite know why he had asked to see her.

Nor did Agnes, when Hope told her, during the afternoon, when they should have been resting, or sewing buttons, or darning stockings, or anything except retailing confidences—naïvely veiled and hesitant confidences, punctuated by the occasional blushes of Hope and gropings after the desired, not too revealing word, by Agnes. Agnes was quite four years the elder, but in ordinary conversation the difference did not make itself felt; the younger girl's quick-flashing mind and habit of thought overleaped the gap. But now she sat at Agnes's feet and imbibed wisdom.

"Maybe he's all right," said Agnes dubiously. With her it was not the situation but the man who made it "all right" or otherwise. Experience had taught her how much "nice customs courtesy to great kings," and her ruler was necessity. "If you used to know him, of course. But where are you going to see him? Oh, the little balcony, that's different! Tell me what he's like. He never came here before, but he left a dollar under his plate last night. He didn't ask you to go to his room, did he?"

"No."

"Then he's all right. Look out for the others."

"That Sanderson did—the pig! He waited for me in the hall; I know that was all he was waiting for."

"I hope you snubbed him properly." Hope nodded. "He's a rotter," added Agnes, with conviction.

"I don't like him," Hope agreed. "But——"

"Yes?"

"Why mustn't we—I——" She floundered hopelessly, and Agnes did not help her. "I don't like him; I never want to see him. But he—no one could hurt

me, could they? It's all the same to me; isn't it to you? I mean, anywhere, any time. Why can't we go where we please? Why can't they leave us alone?"

"Men are different," said Agnes shortly. "Don't you know?"

"No."

"I guess they're crazy," Agnes pursued, with a judicial air. "Didn't you ever see one go off his head?" She spoke in the detached manner of an entomologist discussing the habits of some rare and curious insect at first, but Hope noticed a little shudder run over her as she finished, and her lip curled back in distaste.

Agnes was a Catholic, and devout, if human. Perhaps that explained, in part. The rest her surroundings accounted for; and her point of view was absolutely correct, allowing for the angle.

"No," said Hope again, rather breathless and embarrassed. Once before Agnes had been as frank as this. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, well—they're horrible. And then they say you had no right to—to tempt them. You've got to be careful; you've got to be sure before you believe a man. Even then, of course, they're silly, but the decent ones—they're decent, of course," she ended ambiguously.

"I don't want to tempt anyone," said Hope, blushing furiously. "I just want to talk to someone—sometimes."

"Men can't understand that," said Agnes calmly, shrugging her shoulders. "They act like fools, and then blame us."

"If I don't *try* to tempt anyone, it's not fair," said Hope. "They can tempt me, till they're blue in the face; I don't mind. They ought to take their chances, too."

"What chances?" asked Agnes, with latent humour.

"That we won't like them," replied Hope decidedly.

There was something in that, Agnes thought, but she had not time to examine the proposition critically, having to dress for dinner. Afterward, Hope was quite naturally absent.

From the little balcony one could see a great deal without being seen. The town square lay before them, an expanse of thin, discouraged grass bordered with poplars, obscured now in dusk, with little black figures moving here and there across it. Around it lights appeared one by one in the windows of the houses. Voices floated up from the street below. There were several stiff uncomfortable chairs and a small table, which they drew into a corner, so they might sit facing each other over it. Hope put her feet upon the chair rungs and rested her chin on her hands. Her whole mind was bent on the man opposite, as if she would draw out his innermost secret thoughts. Young femininity possesses a fund of inquisitorial cruelty which positively yearns to dissect a man's very soul and would leave it bare and bleeding before high Heaven and, for sheer ignorance, feel not even a twinge of conscience afterwards.

The innocent hardihood of her eyes impressed him; she was at once so joyous, so lightsome, and so pathetic. He wished she were not quite so young. It smote him like a reproach. Abruptly he asked her age.

"In a month," she said, "I'll be eighteen."

He was more than twenty years her senior. And yet he felt a young man. But she was so very small. What was he doing there, anyway? He could not answer when she countered with:

"What did you want to see me for?"

"I thought I might help you," he repeated thoughtfully.

"How?" For she felt tremendously capable herself, and he perceived that, but she was so very small—and the world looked suddenly terrifying to him. She was adrift in a little cockleshell on the ocean, and himself on the deck of a big liner, looking down. How could he throw her a line? Her frail craft would be swamped in the very wash of the big boat.

"I don't know," he said. "But I have an idea. Let me think it over." He was beginning to have quite a clear idea, but he never spoke in haste; that was his strength. "Do you want to teach school?"

"Not exactly." Her eyes grew dreamy. "No, I shall have to—but I want to go all around the world, and look at everything, and do everything, and meet everyone, and dance, and ride, and——" She broke off with a laugh. "Have you ever been around the world?"

He had been abroad twice, and he told her rather clumsily about France and Egypt—the last because she questioned him eagerly. She was thinking of the tombs of the Pharaohs, and palm-trees, and the Nile, and Cleopatra's barge; and he was thinking of Shepherd's Hotel, of dust and fleas and tedious guides.

"No, I can't say I want to go again. You can't get a decent beefsteak anywhere in the East."

"Oh, oh," she said, almost sorrowfully, "did you go there to look for a *beefsteak*?"

And she laughed and laughed. He could see the point well enough, and joined in; but he knew none the less that beefsteaks were very important. The divergence may not have been entirely spiritual. Hope could indeed have devoured a strawberry ice with enjoyment in the teeth of all the Pharaohs and their tombs. He encouraged her to talk, and the fact that she quoted from books he had never read impressed him extraordinarily, though it was not really strange,

since he never read at all excepting the daily papers. When she shivered he wrapped her quite tenderly in his light overcoat and held her hands to warm them.

She did not mind; there was an involuntary yearning toward her conveyed by his touch. She understood, also, dimly, that only her nearness gave her this power over him; through her he touched nature and to her he bent as the bearer of Nature's inexorable decree. So she could sway him, because there were vast forces, rooted a million centuries deep, behind her; she could have her moment's will of him, hurt him if she chose, and he would be helpless, because of his strength and his sanity. He might set in motion the machines of industry, which would crush a thousand like her, and have no compassion. That was the other side of him. But toward her as an individual he could be only what he was now.

So soon had she taken possession of his imagination. That was her hold, and she had secured it in a moment. He had felt it suddenly when she stood at his elbow in the dining-room, at the most prosaic hour of the day, before he even saw her definitely; her small, light feet had crept up and caught him unawares, and her demure voice in his ear had announced, not that she was coming, but that she was there, close, inside his guard. Then she had sat down and watched him, from the window, with such an air of security.

Decidedly she had taken him by surprise, perhaps on account of the environment, wherein one did not look for such delicate little sprites. If it had been heavy-footed Belle, he would at that moment have been playing billiards and smoking a cigarette very contentedly downstairs.

Her assurance was absolute now. She might have

had some timidity before him earlier, when he was a sort of personification of worldly wisdom and temporal success, but a man cannot carry such attributes with him to a stolen meeting with a snip of a girl; they are as impossible in the circumstances as fireworks. He had to stand before her as a middle-aged and good-natured man in a white waistcoat, somewhat vainly adorned with diamonds, which merely helped to reduce him to her level, or a little below—childish trinkets for such as are pleased with them, not tokens of achievement of a sort. She could not fear him, and he could not make her fear herself.

Therefore his offer of help did not present itself to her seriously. The man of affairs was not present, to her; how, then, could he help her? But the man himself—yes, she liked him. He was accepted, so far, on his merits. It flattered him, in the depths of his unconscious soul, beyond words. Thereafter he was hers; at least in as much as he was his own.

Despite the dark, he could see her eyes grow heavy at last; their faces were close over the small round table. She blinked, and her head drooped, but when she would open her eyes again resolutely they glimmered fitfully, like a cat's. He felt almost afraid, they were so eerie, until she laughed, and the gleam scattered.

"I *am* sleepy," she murmured. "Six o'clock——"
"To-morrow, again?" he asked. "I'll tell you then what I've been thinking. I'll give you my address, too, so you can always reach me."

"All right." She drew herself up, stretching. The soft rustling of her clothing, as her young body tautened and relaxed beneath it, sounded to him like the strange, provocative whispers that run through spring foliage at dusk. Feeling an utter fool, he still surrendered himself to his folly, and while she was say-

ing, "Here, at the same time?" he bent over quickly and awkwardly and kissed both her hands.

She giggled, put her handkerchief to her mouth, and ran away. Edgerton went down and bought himself a drink, though he was an extremely temperate man. Then, instead of mooning about, as he might have a score of years before, he sat down and very resolutely absorbed himself in the details of a new company organisation.

CHAPTER IV

IN the heat of her vexation and wounded pride Hope would not have imagined it possible that she should go to sleep while waiting for Evan, though he delayed till dawn. But she did. She walked into his room very coolly, with the aid of a pass-key, but prudence forbade her to turn on the light. The Morris chair, luxurious with both pillows from the bed, gently soothed her from waking speculation as to the whereabouts of Edgerton into fantastic dreams in which he did not figure at all. He had broken his appointment. She had watched for him three-quarters of an hour in vain. Under no circumstances would she ever speak to him again, of course, but curiosity clamoured for the reason of his nonappearance. Evan might know. It was very simple, therefore, to find and ask him.

Had he guessed her to be there, there is no doubt Evan would have come immediately. She diverted him enormously, beyond anything else the town had to offer. It was like having a pet kitten. It happened he was not in love at the time. But in answer to a query if she would come, she had given him a cool "No," and a game of poker was the next best thing. She drifted off into the charming sleep of her age about the time Jim Sanderson, finding the cards running against him with maddening persistency, threw down his hand and yielded the moment to ill-luck. Evan and the others chose to stay. Sanderson asked Evan for a book someone had mentioned; Evan

tossed him his key and bade him go get it for himself. Then he called for two cards, and forgot about Sanderson, who bored him rather.

It was the pink ribbon on Hope's braid caught Sanderson's eye first. The sudden flood of yellow light released by the electric button under his finger seemed to leap at it. He stood still, smiling unpleasantly. Hope lifted heavy lids to blink at the glare, murmuring, before she looked:

"'Lo, Evan. I wanted——" Then she sat up, rubbed her eyes, and gave him a stare of instinctive antagonism. She was annoyed, not embarrassed.

"Good evening," he said, and turned the key in the lock behind him.

She did not answer.

"Won't I do as well as Hardy?" he asked.

"Not for me," replied Hope, with a mixture of impudence and disdain. She meant exactly what she said—no more. "I'm going, anyway."

"Stay and talk to me a few minutes."

"It's late. Please excuse me."

But she could not get to the door; he stood covering it. And as he advanced toward her he managed to guard it still.

"Got you now," he smiled.

She regarded him doubtfully, taking his measure, the repulsion she always felt for him growing upon her. An involuntary step backward placed a chair between them. If only Evan would come! But he would not; she had only herself to rely on. That was enough, of course. But it was degrading to have to parley with him at all; her impulse was to turn directly from him and quit his presence without again looking at him. What he was saying was not quite clear to her; she was going behind his words, reading his intent, which was not at all clear, either, but yet dis-

gusted her. Or it was his eyes which disgusted; or his bald, shiny head. Though he was a young man.

No, it was his eyes. That was certain the moment he touched her, put his hand on her shoulder. Impulse moved her instantly; if Jim Sanderson had been a psychologist it might have interested him to know that the impact of her hand on his cheek was purely the result of a reflex action. But all he knew was that for the size of her, she was well muscled, and that the blood which flew to his face seemed to colour his vision. The sting of the blow put a sudden edge on what else he felt.

He lifted her off her feet, almost, in his grasp, and said, not loudly, "You shouldn't have done that." And his teeth showed.

It was the culmination of a pursuit lasting three months; a pursuit of which she had been for the most part oblivious. It had not been very hard to avoid, ignore him; the housekeeper, a dragon at times, was sometimes seen more in the light whereby Persephone might have viewed Cerberus on her "not at home" days. But he had been conscious all this while. That was the curse of so small a place; one was, in fact, conscious of every other inhabitant in it. There were not a thousand red herrings a day for every individual trail, as in a great city. He could not help seeing her, always vanishing down a corridor, or looking from a window, or walking on the opposite side of the street. And here he had caught her up, had her fast. He could make her listen to him. He could—— But very naturally he was not reasoning.

And she was. His own words gave her the cue. She should not have done that! No, her blow was not heavy enough. One had to be either stronger, or fleeter; quite so! She was still, with the quiescence

of determined enmity, until he, devouring her hot face with his abominable eyes, felt too secure, and the flexure of his arm told her this was her opportunity. So she went out of his clutch with the instinctive downward wriggling motion of an obstinate baby. The table was between them before he knew what had happened, and he held a little strip of her muslin blouse in his fingers. Dishevelled, flushed, furious, but inwardly glacial, she backed cautiously against the dresser.

"Please go away," she said. Her hands were behind her. There was something of Evan's in the dresser drawer; she was fumbling for it blindly, not daring to take her eyes from him.

And again, if he had been a psychologist, he would have gone away. But he did not.

This time his hand did not reach her shoulder.

He made a great deal of noise falling; it sounded to Hope as if the roof had come down. Her fingers, gripping the barrel of Evan's neat .38 revolver, tingled from the force with which she had struck. Calculation had prompted her to club her gun; she knew guns, and was not inclined to use it more messily; anyway, she was not sure it was loaded. If he had guessed her purpose, of course its accomplishment had been impossible; he could have fended the attack easily, but he did not guess. On the whole, he was obtuse, as well as disgusting. She stood still, a moment, a bit shaken, but seeing him no whit less disgusting lying on the floor at her feet, with an unpleasant red mark on his temple, than he had been standing before her. Perhaps he was dead!

Well, if he were—— But first, she must get out of there. She did, turning off the light as she stood at the door.

If he were, he was properly served. In the very

bottom of her heart she felt that. Much the same sensation as one had after stepping on a noxious insect.

In her room she scrubbed her face furiously with soap and water. It afforded a temporary relief. She took off her torn blouse and threw it viciously in a corner, holding it by the tips of her fingers, poking it with her toe. An ineffaceable soilure seemed to be visible on it. She could have lacerated, bitten herself. A faint nausea crept over her. After a while she grew calmer and sat on the edge of her narrow bed, thinking, trying not to think. A vague curiosity stirred her. Was he dead? And then her mind began to work freely again, and she remembered that he had been breathing heavily all the while he lay there. Of course he was not dead! Certainly, she was ridiculous. How had it happened she could have thought him dead, while he was visibly breathing? Perhaps because he should have been dead. Her mind annihilated him, refused to admit him to the company of living things. That was it. It was the protest of her own exquisitely healthy and normal psychology against the monstrousness of his kind.

As if summoned by her thoughts, his voice came to her distantly. Her window was open; it looked out on the courtyard at the back of the building. His words were not clear, but the voice was unmistakable. Someone was chaffing him. She had been sitting there for over half an hour.

She shuddered again. Slipping on a wisp of a dressing-jacket, she went in search of Agnes, who represented things sane and clean.

Agnes sat at her mirror, making herself dainty, aiding Nature a trifle in the matter of carmine. Hope only wanted to sit with her awhile. They exchanged casual, friendly words. The atmosphere was soothing;

Agnes was so calm, so delicate and unruffled. Agnes knew all about these things, and refused to let them come near her. She walked daintily, but surely, avoiding them. She was not clever at all, but she was herself. She refused to take colour from her surroundings. That was what one must do. But—what else? One could not always, always live in a dull routine of work, never looking to the right nor to the left, going to one tiny room at evening. Hope had never read Dostoevski; she did not know he had put her difficulty into words: "Do you know that a man's mind becomes paralyzed in small, poky rooms?" Nevertheless, she felt it.

Her mind rebelled constantly, vigorously. One had to leave the small, poky room sometimes—even at the risk of such an encounter as this. She remembered her own dictum. They ought to take their chances. She was not sorry. Not at all. She had done quite right. Oh, they should indeed take their chances! All the evasions she had been compelled to these months past crowded on her suddenly, invaded her memory. At the time they had not troubled her. The memory of Jim Sanderson's eyes was what made them intolerable. Why should she, Agnes, any girl, be hunted like that? They harmed no one; they earned their bread. Those lurking, whispering, ogling creatures needed what he had got. And she would go where she pleased, and always be careful to even the chances. After having the half a principality to run over at large when a child, she would not let maturity bar her into one little room.

But then, she knew she did not want to go anywhere again, for a long, long time at least. Time to forget. She could study, to fill it. In a month more she was to leave, too.

"Oh," said Agnes suddenly, "I forgot——" She

fumbled in her belt. "Your big man gave me this at dinner. For you."

It was a note. He had had to catch the seven o'clock train. He had not known where to find her. In six weeks or so he was coming back. Would she not write?

He signed his name, also. But that, of course, did not impress her.

No, she would not write. She did not feel inclined to write. What was there to say? Really, she had never been inclined to talk to him; it had only interested her to hear him talk. And now her disgust was a wall between her and masculinity, making communication difficult.

There were flowers from him next day. She meant to write, to be polite. But she put it off. She never wrote. The flowers were delightful; they perfumed his memory, in a way, purified it with their innocent incense. But even so, writing struck her as too difficult—more, too profitless. But, as they were roses, she kept the petals and put them in a little muslin bag. The sweetness remained in them.

And in a month she did go away. There was no Normal School here; only one town in Alberta was large enough for that.

It was sorrowful to leave Agnes. Everyone seemed to regret her exit. The dry, thin spinster housekeeper, even, gave her a linen handkerchief for a parting gift. The rotund bartender brought glasses of claret lemonade for all the girls upstairs—Agnes, Belle, Hope and the housekeeper. She kissed Agnes affectionately at the last, a smooth, powdery, perfumed kiss. She never saw her again.

Evan had been reproachful. Why would she never come to see him again? So she did come, and sat and stared at him with meditative, solemn, round eyes.

And at the last she decided that he was really just what he had always seemed, and absolved him from a great many things of which he had never dreamed. And he laughed at her again, and she put her arms about his neck, standing on tiptoe, and kissed him shyly for farewell.

"Heaven be good to you," he said. "Look here, child, what did I ever do to you? Was it because I wasn't here the last time? You told me you wouldn't come."

She started.

"How did you know I was here?"

His reminder brought it all back so vividly, with the familiar room to aid memory. He saw her lip curl back from her small teeth, and looked at her shrewdly.

"I found your pink ribbon. Look." He drew it out of his pocket, all soiled and crumpled. "What frightened you away?"

"Nothing." But she changed colour too palpably.

"Jim Sanderson came up that evening," he said slowly. "Were you here then?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"No. And I couldn't very well ask him." She perceived Evan in that. No, of course he would not ask.

"He—I say, how did he get that bump on his head? He said he walked into something, in the dark."

"Oh, he walked into something," said Hope curtly, "but not in the dark."

"Why, you little devil," remarked Evan, rather joyously. "Jove, to think you gave him what he deserved. What'd you use? It looked as if it might have been a paving stone!"

She showed him, and he chuckled inordinately, with an unregenerate plaint that he could not have done it himself.

"Oh, he needed it," he said.

"Do you think so?" asked Hope.

She felt better. Evan was unconsciously exonerating his sex as a whole. A moral fog lifted from her mind. He reassured her, still chuckling.

So she went away, almost gay again, buoyant, as became her best. Nevertheless, she decided to wait a little, to satisfy herself in her narrow room, if possible, until her judgment ripened. Mere fastidiousness forbade the thought of another such encounter.

The next night the train carried her northward. She felt eager and wistful, and lonely, and intensely alive and capable of being glad. She had an immense, unfed appetite for life.

The train rushed on, and on, roaring through the dark. It seemed to have an object of its own. Her being aboard it appeared incidental and of no consequence to it. It was something like life.

She wished Evan had been there. He would have been warm, and human, and aware of her.

CHAPTER V

IT should have been spring, but the streets were grey and dry, and the wind brought dust instead of the scent of flowers. Dust—dust—it stung her eyes and the taste of it was on her lips. She felt it in her hair.

The town lay in a cup of the hills, where the river wound a lazy half circle. At the edge, just beginning to climb the slopes, hovered a fringe of skeleton dwellings still building. Then, abruptly, without even a sown field to frame it all, the prairie began. The houses were shriekingly new, and naked to the sharp sunlight, save on one or two short streets, where they sheltered gratefully behind rows of soft maple and cottonwood and a lapful of vivid green lawn. This was only in the very oldest part of town, where the houses were little and low, softened to a charming homeliness by the passage of twenty years or so since they had constituted the whole town.

"If I only had a little sackcloth," mused Hope. "I shall be twenty-one to-morrow!" She looked even less than that, which seemed a ripe age to her. Since seventeen she was very little changed, being still very slight, the narrow shoulders, with an almost imperceptible droop to them, giving her an unwarranted air of fragility. All her figure was girlishly flat; her bosom was barely curved, and her motions abrupt. Standing on the schoolhouse steps, she looked up and down the empty and profitless streets. The children had dispersed. Her mind hopped about inconsequently.

"Are you going home?" Mary Dark, coming up behind her, suddenly slipped an arm through hers. Hope started, turned and smiled, but said nothing. "I came to take you to Mrs. Patten's for tea," Mary added. Mary was of a pale darkness, with a sorrowful, impish face.

"I—I don't want to—just now," murmured Hope doubtfully. "I want—to run away." Her eyes searched the horizon of dun-coloured hills that met a pale, clear sky.

"Where to?" asked Mary. "And with whom?"

"Everywhere—nobody," said Hope. "All alone. If I don't, I shall explode. Do you know that somewhere people are doing things—inventing, exploring, writing, thinking. They've found the North Pole, and discovered X-rays, and built aëroplanes. We sit here, like chickens in a coop. Mentally, we're in the Dark Ages. I want to go and crowd in, to be part of it all—understand it. Things are happening, and I'm not there!" Her voice was almost a wail. "I want to be in the middle of the big commotion, to clutch the tail of the comet. I want an X-ray for breakfast, I want to fly. I want to go where real, new ideas are being thrown around like brickbats. I don't care if one does hit me behind the ear. When I left home it wasn't for this." She waved her hand contemptuously. "Want to watch the wheels go 'round. I thought I could do it—get near to life. But if this is all, why didn't I marry one of those tow-headed Swedes on the next ranch? I tell you I want to see the world. And I *don't* mean simply cafés and loud, over-dressed people."

"This is the world," said Mary Dark wisely. "I've seen it."

"Like the Sydenhams did?" asked Hope scornfully. "You've heard, of course, you know them—I don't."

They came back from England last week, after spending a week there. Went over to 'do' the Continent for six months. They never saw the Continent. They've lived here all their lives, haven't they? And they came back here; said there was nothing over there, anyway!"

"Yes, I heard," said Mary, laughing. "But what ails you? Quarrelled with Ned?"

"M-mm-mph," Hope answered, with an indescribable sound and a shrug. "Nor with Tom nor Dick nor Harry nor whatever their names are. I wish there were even some real men here. Clerks, and retired grocers, and remittance men and things."

"But you flirt with them," Mary reminded her.

"I suffer fools—sometimes," said Hope disingenuously. "Oh, I'm suffocating. I really cannot bear ever to see one of them again. I'm almost twenty-one," she repeated hopelessly. "Is life really like this? I thought it would be all one glorious adventure, not an endurance contest in boredom—slow starvation."

"Come to tea, you idiot," answered Mary affectionately. "Fate put a little too much yeast in your lump of dough, I fancy. It will fizz out by and by."

"You," said Hope, studying the other's half-veiled eyes and close mouth, "have had your adventures. So you sneer at me. Look, there's a naughty-mobile. I want a ride. Oh!"

"I've had nothing," said Mary Dark. "And you're flirting with that chauffeur! Hope, you wretch!"

"Not," denied Hope, smiling sidelong. "I met him at the rink last night. I didn't know he was a chauffeur. I thought he was an oyster. He never speaks. But his eyelashes are remarkable."

"You are an abandoned wretch," remarked Mary severely. "I shall leave you here."

She turned the corner, but through her back hair she could see that the car had drawn up to the curb.

"Want a ride?" asked the boy of the eyelashes' laconically, in a rich, husky drawl.

"I do," said Hope, and scrambled up beside him. "Whose car is this?"

"Mine—maybe," said the chauffeur, still drawling, and with a jerk of his wrist he sent the glittering monster hurtling down the road. It was true that he had remarkable eyelashes, and his warm, olive cheeks had a down on them like a ripe peach, and his eyes were dark, and ingenuous, like a child's. His leather cap and plain serge coat became him almost too much. Like Hope, he was just past twenty—in years. "Where to?" he inquired, leaning back.

"Anywhere," she said ecstatically, taking off her hat and putting it under her feet. They slid out along the river road, through the one bit of beauty nearby. The dust streamed out behind them, but they breasted clean air. Out of sight of habitations, the boy put his arm about her.

"Don't be a pest," said Hope crossly.

He removed it.

"All right," he agreed. "Didn't know."

"I only met you once," she said. "I even forget your name."

"Name's Allen Kirby," he drawled. "And I'll stick around, if that will help."

His face was expressionless; Hope laughed despite herself.

"Whose car is this?" she demanded again.

"I'll tell you—next time," he promised.

"But there might not be a next time."

"Won't you come?" He turned toward her, watching the road out of the corner of his eye. "Perhaps

you fly too high for a chauffeur. You don't look like a school teacher."

"How did you know?"

"I spotted you a week ago. You look like a big-town girl. I asked to meet you. Drove around six times to-day before you came out. Don't know any other girls here."

It was a long speech for him. It astonished Hope immeasurably. She plied him with questions as they fled through the waning afternoon. Sometimes he answered; sometimes he turned the point, drawling, immobile with the stillness of one who always watches. She forgot she had been bored. Here was a most authentic individual. Class distinction meant no more to her than a pterodactyl. Besides in those earlier days chauffeurs were outside of class. They were adventurers, a new species.

They drove on and on, and back through the dusk again, and she was sorry it must end. He put her down, at her request, at Mrs. Patten's door, and said negligently, "To-morrow," and purred off again.

Mrs. Patten lay on a wicker chaise-longue, in a dark, straight gown and much comfort, nibbling Graham biscuits and talking gossip with Mary Dark, who smoked interminable cigarettes and listened. She had eyes like Mary's in that they were full of surface merriment with deep wells of shadow below. But hers were of a rare hazel-grey, and her features were modelled with classic regularity. If she was not known as an unusually lovely woman it was because she was too indifferent; she wore her beauty casually, as if, indeed, it truly belonged to her, rather than like a seller parading her wares. She must have been over thirty; but she had the same frank grace about that. And, though it was not so apparent, Lisbeth Patten had, not only the courage of her convictions, but the

courage to run counter to them. There were things very fine and very foolish about her: she was compounded of tact and indiscretion; of convention and generosity. And neither her friends nor her enemies knew why they were so.

Now she fixed Hope with one eloquent glance, and Hope wriggled uncomfortably. It was impossible to defend without being attacked. Mary Dark smiled with wicked humour. The three were friends, somewhat in the manner of castaways on a desert island. At heart they loved each other.

"Have a good time?" asked Mary, casting the gauntlet.

"I did," said Hope.

"Eleanor Travers was here this afternoon," said Mrs. Patten, pouring, with a peculiarly refined and graceful gesture, a cupful of tea quite black and cold and giving it to Hope absently. "She was asking about you, Hope. I think she means to call."

Hope understood, and did not understand. She understood the significance of the implication, but it would never be possible for her to see, with Mrs. Patten's eyes, the importance of it. Miss Travers was conspicuous in the town's inevitable "younger set." She "assisted" at half the social functions, and was an indispensable onlooker at the other half. Her three new gowns a season were described thirty times during that season in the weekly budget of society items in the one afternoon paper. Hope had been in the young city two years now, and said so, though without any especial animus.

"I know, dear," said Mrs. Patten. "And people are just beginning to know you."

Again Hope understood.

"I don't think so," she returned, dropping her lids. "Fortunately! But what must I do to be saved?"

They all laughed.

"But, seriously; Hope," began Mrs. Patten.

"Don't reason with her," said Mary Dark. "Ask her to do it for you." She has no intelligence!"

"No," agreed Hope happily. "But, is it necessary?"

"Perhaps not," said Mary, mildly exasperated. "But one might as well have what there is going. It would amuse you—the dances and teas and rubbish—above all, the scandal. What else is there in this backwater?"

"Well, I can make my own scandal," answered Hope. "But I can't dance all by my lone, of course. Ned Angell asked me to go to the next Tennis dance, and a card for it fell on me yesterday out of a clear sky. Is that a step forward? I hope you're satisfied, now I've progressed to—a bank clerk! Our *crème de la crème*!"

"Where did you meet Ned?" asked Mrs. Patten.


"I dunno," said Hope vaguely. "Wasn't it here? You told me about him. No? Well, somewhere. You know, one is always meeting men; stepping on them every minute or two. I never can remember where I meet any of 'em. He thinks I am an unappreciated genius. Because I made a picture of him behind the grille at the bank, and me feeding him with peanuts. Please don't take me literally; it never really happened. What shall I get for a new gown?"

They discussed the topic with animation for a time, and branched from that to a consideration of a play by Wedekind which Mary had just read, and the latest song by Strauss which Mrs. Patten played for them. And then when Hope thought she was safe they returned to her projected social career once more and talked around and under and across that, and she went away feeling vaguely apprehensive and bedevilled

and docile. She would do anything for Mary Dark and Mrs. Patten—if she knew how to do it, and what for! In this instance she knew neither.

She was quite willing to go to the dance with Ned Angell, but she could not see why that should preclude her riding with Allen Kirby and becoming intoxicated with the innocent joy of being alive at the rate of fifty miles an hour. These things did not strike her as being in the least incompatible; and, of the two youths, her dispassionate estimate placed Allen Kirby a notch higher. Chiefly because he had a fine young pair of shoulders beneath that serge coat, and he could drive like a demon. Ned Angell, she knew very well, drank—which she thought simply idiotic—and he had no chest; but he wore his clothes with an air, strummed the guitar and sang love songs to all the “buds,” and was on the organising committees of the Assemblies and Tennis dances.

These things struck her as extremely inadequate, regarded as virile occupations. They were in keeping with the general unsatisfactoriness of things. Three years before she had felt that now life must widen out before her, displaying new and unsuspected vistas of joyful and intelligent activity, and an ultimate purpose not theretofore clear. No such matter had happened. She had dropped into her new environment without a ripple, and lay there like a pebble at the bottom of a brook, with the clear, invisible current of life still flowing by in merely mechanical contact. She had wanted to be a little boat riding the stream, making headway toward the sea. And all around her the other little pebbles lay, apparently content with their lot, wedged in their muddy bed. No, they were not like pebbles; they resembled busy little waterbugs, flying madly about their own tiny pool, keeping away from the rapids below and the fresh springs above.



Now, it seemed, she might also be a waterbug, if she would. A magnificent goal, if she could shrink the boundaries of her land of dreams to this! There was, she gathered, one prime requisite. One must above all things take the waterbug life seriously. One must be a good waterbug! Ned Angell, now, was a perfectly good waterbug.

The enormous absurdity of it smote on her sense of humour, but still left her bewildered. She had been wont to assume life in its social aspects to be essentially simple. One met people; one liked or did not like them. So it was settled, and one chose one's friends. Of the arbitrary and rigid nature of formal social connections she had no conception. The claims of family, of money, of prestige, meant nothing to her. She had no feeling for the clan; not even a realisation of it. All her distinctions were personal; she had morally the eye of the artist, to whom clothes and appanages are drapery and ornament, not insignia.

For instance, the Round Up Club. It was *the* club. As yet there was no country club; this was a purely masculine affair. A group of the men who had made money had organised, bought a little house, and were wont to sprawl on the veranda of it, smoking ostentatious cigars and imbued with a terrific air of superiority. One could not doubt that they felt superior. Because they sat on that particular veranda. The veranda, also, was sacrosanct because they sat on it. This led nowhere; it was funny, but perplexing. Also, the Round Up Club! The name alone.—They were mostly fat and tubby gentlemen, who would have been more than ill at ease on the hurricane deck of a bronco.

One she had seen the day before on the sacred veranda, though, was rather good to look at. Dark

eyes, with a smile in them, and a lean, graceful figure. She did not know who he was.

She wished she could feel serious about Eleanor Travers's projected call. Lately she had been reading *Vanity Fair*. Would Becky Sharp have spent so much diplomacy and duplicity to attain, say, to Mrs. Lockwood's teas? Mrs. Lockwood, plump and placid, whose husband had made the most money, and who therefore "led society"?

Of course there was no real difference in being a Knight of the Garter and the Golden Fleece, and a master-butcher, so long as one was "first in the village in Gaul," but, since her part was to be all concerned with outward show and made no pretence of examining inward worth, Hope felt she ought at least to have the show. The game might not be worth the candle, but by every right there should be a candle, if there was to be a game. So far there *was* a difference between a Duchess and a butcher's wife, and Hope could understand Becky Sharp.

Becky's candle glittered very brightly, anyway.

But perhaps Eleanor Travers and the remoter Mrs. Lockwood might have something to offer of themselves. One ought to try it out. There wasn't anything else, as Mary Dark had said.

But there was; there was one's personal liberty. Yes, the mere right to talk to a chauffeur instead of a narrow-chested bank clerk, if one chose. Without some *quid pro quo*, Hope knew very well she would calmly keep her liberty. She hoped she might keep Mrs. Patten and Mary Dark also. Mrs. Patten taught French, German and music in the schools, where Hope instructed in English and drawing. Mary did multitudinous things in a newspaper office, and was taking a new and better paid place shortly as advertising manager for a big new firm of land promoters.

Neither had any more than she earned. For that reason, she would probably be able to keep them. It was their mutual poverty that constituted the desert island whereon their friendship flourished. If a ship with golden sails came for one of them, she must disappear over the cloudy horizon. These matters Hope meditated, and had the more leisure for that exercise since Allen Kirby failed to reappear. There had been no definite appointment; Hope assumed he had failed of finding her. She spent her evenings at home, reading omnivorously as was her wont, or at Mrs. Patten's, where she sat meekly under the veiled admonitions of her social mentor, and was therefore accounted a good girl. Eleanor Travers had a cold, and the call was postponed. The Tennis dance was a month off. Existence continued as a succession of impatient yawns.

Deep down she was in a turmoil of wild yearnings for things impossible and nebulous, for the edge of the skyline, and space, and action. Sometimes her heart grew big in her with longing, even to the verge of pain. She fed it with French irregular verbs, to please Mrs. Patten; and to please herself was no longer visible to her weedy collection of half-baked admirers. It came to her like a revelation that they had always bored her. She felt growing pains.

Then, on an evening of drifty, drizzling dusk, she galloped down the river road and came upon Allen Kirby, or, more properly, Allen Kirby's feet projecting from beneath the huge black and brassy-bright automobile, while a large man in a sheep-lined duck coat held a headlight for his convenience. The man in the duck coat looked up at the sound of hoofbeats; her half-broken horse shied and danced at the alarming spectacle.

It was no kind of weather to be riding, which was

one reason why Hope had gone. It suited her to ride in the dark, in the rain, in any kind of weather or at any time of day—if it suited her. She wore a divided skirt and a hideous red peaked cap, and her mount stood sixteen hands and weighed fourteen hundred and fifty. When he promptly stood on his hind legs she leaned forward until she could have kissed him between the ears, but she did not. She merely jerked on the Spanish bit, downward, until he grunted, looked around under his neck, and asked impertinently:

“Want a tow?”

“No, thanks, not yet,” said the big man, his teeth flashing in his plump pink face.

And Hope said:

“Good heavens!” for no apparent reason, and stared blankly as he lifted his cap. And then, “How do you do, Mr. Edgerton?”

He stepped forward, with a mechanical “Good evening,” and turned the light on her face. It was hardly necessary, being not yet the hour when all cats are grey, but it helped, for when she blinked, by a sudden shift of memory he saw her again, nodding sleepily over a small table on a veranda that looked out to a dusty square set round with sudden pin points of lighted windows.

“You!” he remarked redundantly. “Well, I’ll be damned! Tell me about it. Why didn’t you answer my letter?”

CHAPTER VI

BUT where is Mr. Edgerton?" asked Hope, stepping lightly to the seat beside Allen Kirby.

"We'll pick him up at the Club corner," said Allen, and without a change of expression added, "You'd better get in the tonneau; I'm only chuffing this trip."

"Oh, splash!" said Hope, and scrambled over the back of the seat. "But I want to ask you things."

She stood up and leaned over his shoulder and proceeded to do so. It had not been possible to hold an extended conversation with Edgerton on that rain-driven road, and as for Allen, he had merely given her one impenetrable glance out of the corners of his Murillo-cherub eyes which had constrained her insensibly to a brief nod of recognition. Edgerton might or might not have noticed it; Hope would have greeted the chauffeur heartily but for his own curious reserve. But Edgerton had insisted he must see her again, hear something of how the world went with her. When she told him very cheerfully that she had nowhere to receive anyone—the tedious sprigs who squired her were obliged to find an excuse of skating rink or ice cream orgy for the pleasure of her company—he had suggested the motor and the first fine evening. And Allen had grinned on one side of his face only, the side presented to Hope, when Edgerton told him to remember her address.

It was fine now, after the cold spring rain; the earth gave out vernal odours, grown green over night; the West wind was gentle and bland. Coral banded

the sunset edge of the world and a low star shone like a jewel, although the crystalline air still seemed to hold the light of day in magical solution.

Hope asked fifteen or twenty questions while they drove eight blocks, and received, for lack of time, less than half as many replies. Edgerton had lately acquired large interests, in land and mining properties, in Alberta; he meant to spend some considerable intervals of time there in the near future. He had organised the Golden West Development Company; Hope cried out at that, for it was with them Mary was engaged. Allen had been Edgerton's second chauffeur in Chicago, and Edgerton had sent him up, two weeks before, with the car. He did not know how long he might stay. Edgerton had four cars, and would not be without one.

"His wife uses the other three," said Allen drily.

"What's she like?" questioned Hope with the liveliest and most impersonal curiosity.

"A hell-cat," Allen informed her briefly.

Hope merely said "Oh," and did not like to press the query. It seemed unfriendly to pry thus into the intimate unhappiness of one who had tried to be kind to her. Hope had strange reserves and delicacies, inherited from a prouder generation than this, an age when private laundries were used for family linen and broken hearts were not served up bleeding at a penny apiece on the front pages of the dailies.

"But he has a daughter," mused Hope. "Isn't she pretty?"

"I guess so," said Allen; "any millionaire's daughter is." He was not without worldly wisdom. But he added in honesty, "She's not so bad; a good deal like the old man. Not much side; she talks to me friendly enough."

"Are you going to elope with her? It's being done," Hope teased him.

He answered, half seriously:

"I wouldn't marry any rich girl; they can't help it, but they're too used to thinking the world was made especially for 'em to walk on." His slow, soft, drawling voice, without an inflection, lent a certain humour to most of his utterances; Hope found herself laughing at him constantly, and he told her once: "I like you because you seem so happy. You're always laughing." But now he went on, "Young fellows brought up to spend money are the same. They don't see things like we do; they don't know what's real."

"I suppose not," said Hope thoughtfully.

She reflected that there was a certain pleasure in that knowledge of reality, however hard one found it. The soil was good underfoot, even though the motor was soft and swift. A little of both would be agreeable—if one could have both. Even while she thought, she had Allen explaining that he had not come to take her for the promised ride because Edgerton had arrived a day or two earlier than the programme called for.

"You won't want to go with me now," he drawled.

"Oh, won't I?" remarked Hope. "Don't be an idjit. I will if you'll ask me—unless you'd be fired for taking me."

"He'll never know," said Allen.

Leaning against his shoulder, she felt him shake with suppressed mirth. She could see no real occasion for it. Why should she not go, if she chose? The ethics of "railroading" the car she left Allen to settle with his own conscience; as for her going or not going, she had tentatively decided that she was under no obligation to refrain. Why not?

"You're a funny girl," drawled Allen.

He stopped for Edgerton, who stood on the pavement lighting a cigarette from a gold-mounted case. Everything about his appearance was in keeping with that costly trinket; his linen, his shoes, his spotless light grey suit and fawn overcoat, his too youthful hat, shouted of money, almost drowning out the feebler piping of good taste. His diamonds were more numerous than ever; his rather ruddy face shaved to a nicety. And he looked positively super-clean. As he climbed in beside her, smiling and shaking her small hand vigorously in his own grey *suède* gloved one, Hope smelt fine soap and toilet waters and heard the silk lining of his overcoat rustle. It gave her a wish to pat him on the back, smooth his white *piqué* waistcoat approvingly, and tell him that he looked very nice indeed. The thought crinkled the corners of her mouth and brought out a dimple, and they beamed at each other, each quite unaware of the other's motive for mirth. As the car started a tallish young man, just turning the corner to go to the club, started slightly and raised his hat, but neither saw him. He was quite a personable young man, and appeared to be interested in what he saw. The big car purred away.

"Take the best road and go ahead. I suppose you've learned your way about," said Edgerton, addressing Allen's inexpressive back, with a note of good-natured banter. Allen nodded without turning. "They all railroad the cars out," he added resignedly to Hope, who bit her tongue on a too hasty word of confirmation. She had a positively fatal gift of candour, which served her ill, for when she had told the worst and the most, less ingenuous minds invariably drew the conclusion that it was merely a prelude and concealment for further misdoings. "And now," said Edgerton, "I want to know."

"But this is all there is to know," said Hope, and threw out her hands. "May we go fast?"

"That's you!" He spoke to the chauffeur.

The purring deepened; the river sped by like a ribbon of quicksilver. A light came into Hope's eyes, but her body relaxed in a sort of ecstasy.

And Edgerton's heart melted in him again, and he knew himself once more a fool. That gay, unconscious courage of hers. It was plain she thought of life as a glorified "joy-ride," and he knew it for a treadmill, where the gayest might weary quickest, stumble, lose heart and go down. No, she would not go down, but she would lose heart none the less, and that spark in her eyes would die out.

"What do you want to do with yourself?" he asked abruptly.

"Everything," she answered, smiling radiantly out of the fulness of the moment.

"If I make it possible," he forestalled her immediate objection, "would you like to go abroad and study art, or go to college?"

"Why should you?"

Somehow he had not anticipated that.

"Because I'd like to," he answered very simply, drawing the rug up over her knees.

"Oh." She pondered, turned to him, and her eyes accepted his word. "But I must think." She thought, visibly, puckering her fair wide brows. "Not abroad; not art," she said at last. "I'd be a fraud. I have no genius. Only a trifling talent, a trick. I teach—the A B C's. Anyone could, if she couldn't draw a crooked line. Read it out of a book. It would be a waste of money, of time, of effort. But you're awfully good. I wish I was a genius; it would be so nice to say yes, and be a wonderful credit to you. Oh, I've often thought of it. But it isn't there. Genius must

simplify things for the possessor of it." He could not catch all she was saying, now that she mused to herself. "They know what they've to live for, and they can take hold. Now me, I've only life to live for, just like everyone else. And it's wonderful, but I can't seem to take hold of it. It gets away from me. Lots of people—most people—never do capture it. Their whole lives escape them. I wonder, does it always escape them? Or is there somewhere, after all this weedy barrenness is ended, where they—oh, excuse me; I'm such a scatter-brained animal."

He looked puzzled.

"But college?" he asked finally.

"Were you thinking of that, three years ago?"

"Yes," he nodded. "You might have been started by now. I've thought of you often since then. When I went back there, I asked for you. But you seemed to have disappeared. Still, I thought I'd find you again, before now. It's pretty hard to miss anyone out here." That was quite true. There were but three towns—not cities—of any size in all Alberta then, and to walk down Main Street in any of the three was to be seen of all men. Two people, town dwellers, both living in the Province, could not fail of crossing each other ultimately.

"Oh," she said, surprised, "I had no friends there. How nice of you to remember. To think of you caring!" It gave her a warm, quick emotion.

"Yes," he returned, "I do care." She was oblivious, hugging her knees; he flushed darkly, unobserved. "Will you go?"

"Mary's been to college," she said, with seeming irrelevance. And Mary, like herself, was stranded here, high out of the tide rise of the world's real activities. Naturally, the connecting chain of ideas was lost to him. He only stared at her anxiously.

"Let me think awhile," she begged him once again.

"I'll be here six weeks," he said. "Take your time. Tell me when you've decided."

They turned homeward presently. She talked less, feeling slightly overwhelmed by his generosity, and shy. He, too, was guarding himself. A betrayal of his curiously mixed feelings would have seemed grossly unfair to her.

No, with all his clear and naturally kindly mind he desired to set her rather in a straight path, though it led her, gay and elusive, always away from him. In that wish half his heart concurred. The other half struggled to voice wilder impulses, to catch at the skirts of her youth and hold her. She represented lost and impossible things to him, things too sweet and strange to be ever quite forgotten, desires fed on husks and still hungering.

At her own gate he dismounted with her and followed her into the screened porch. Then the spark of rebellion in his heart flamed up. But he was as awkward as a boy.

"Oh," she said, crossly, "don't be——"

"Ridiculous," was the word that died on her tongue. The sight of his abashment made her feel too keen an edge on it for utterance.

"All right," he muttered. It reminded her of Allen Kirby, waiting no more than twenty feet away in the car, and she choked on a giggle. "I'm sorry." He took her hand, and the pressure of his pained her. "Good night. Do you think you might come again?"

"Why not?" she said carelessly. "Good night." And as he turned away, she put her hand on his sleeve. She was sorry she had laughed at him—twice, now. "Thank you," she said gravely, and held up her cheek.

He touched it with his lips, hastily, clumsily, feeling his very ears burn. The door closed on her decisively.

Allen nodded assent, his smooth face positively sleepy with immobility, at the brusque direction. The car moved away. Edgerton sat and studied his chauffeur's back gloomily—and envied him.

CHAPTER VII

HOPE was dressing for the Tennis dance, fresh-faced and sleepy-eyed. She had been out half the night before, and had taken cat-naps through dinner time to atone for it. Now she brushed her hair, drinking a glass of milk and reading, all at the same time. Her ears did not burn, though they should have. They were only delicately pink.

Mary Dark and Mrs. Patten were discussing her. Rather, Mrs. Patten talked and Mary listened, her sorrowful grey eyes veiled, her mouth curled at the corner.

"You ought to have some influence with her," mourned Mrs. Patten. "She's getting herself talked about."

"Yes, we're proving that," remarked Mary, in a detached manner. "What do you want me to do?"

"Give her a hint," said Mrs. Patten, distinctly irritated. "Eleanor Travers asked me about it only to-day. She was *seen* in Mr. Edgerton's automobile last week."

"She shouldn't have been seen," agreed Mary gravely. "I'll tell her so."

Mrs. Patten opened her mouth to speak, then stopped, and a tide of painful colour flowed into her face. Mary saw it, through her eyelashes, and dropped them lower.

"I will, really, try to," said Mary, her tones subtly altered. "Of course she's a little fool. That's why we like her."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Mrs. Patten thoughtfully,

for she was not a fool, though she might act like one on occasion. "You mean she's herself; she's different. But one has to pretend." She flushed again. "Of course I told Eleanor it was all a mistake."

"She's known Edgerton since she was a baby, almost," said Mary, twisting the truth to the comforting effect of a lie.

"Yes, we understand," said Mrs. Patten.

"Perfectly," said Mary, who did.

"It would be such a pity," said Mrs. Patten. "People would like her, if she'd give them a chance. But she can't afford to do that sort of thing."

"That's it," agreed Mary again, with unperceived irony.

"Mr. Edgerton is so conspicuous. What is he like? Mrs. Shane told me——"

"He snubbed Cora Shane. She tried to add him to her collection. I can fancy what she told you. He's not bad. An overgrown boy. Shrewd. Kind. Selfish. Simple. Very simple. He doesn't like women who swear, and tell smoking-room stories. So Cora——"

"Of course," said Mrs. Patten, with an inflection of malice. "Is it true that he doesn't live with his wife?"

"Not quite yet," said Mary, allowing that to be interpreted as it might chance. The possible, though remote, significance of the remark in that context did not escape her. She laughed quietly. "Oh, yes, it might happen. In that case Hope could afford to."

Mrs. Patten was silent, thoughtful.

"But," added Mary meanly, "it's really the chauffeur Hope is flirting with," again making a half-truth serve.

It served. Mrs. Patten almost turned pale.

"Oh, that's impossible," she gasped.

"Or the car," said Mary dreamily. "Getting down to essentials. Hope is rather direct, you know."

"It was Ned mentioned it to me," said Mrs. Patten, truly distressed. "He wouldn't believe it, of course."

"She must have snubbed Ned," said Mary profoundly, forgetting her audience.

Mrs. Patten winced. They sat awhile in silence. Mary was thinking of the curious friendship between Hope and Edgerton.

It had all been under her eyes; she watched it with a certain pity, but no desire to interfere. She knew the uselessness of attempting to deflect from any course such a secretive, yet straightforward nature as had Hope. She would go through or under or over an obstacle, softly and silently and as if unaware of opposition. There was nothing meanly obstinate about her, but in certain ways there was no approach to her either. She would do no harm, probably; but certainly, having been born, not under a star that danced but under a little faint wandering comet, she would never fall in tune with the world to the extent of establishing a fixed orbit. One must take or leave her. Which of these the world would do depended, Mary justly reflected, largely on her luck.

Mary had come to know Edgerton well. To him she was only a quizzical smile, a clever brain, deft hands. He trusted her. Sometimes he sent word to Hope through her. Little notes, punctiliously unsealed. She had been unwilling at first; but he could easily reach Hope, and it was better this way than through another, less her friend. Mary, sitting at her desk in his own office, fancied she could tell when he was thinking of Hope, and at such times, when he caught her eyes on him, he would redden slightly and pore over his letters and estimates again. Squared up to his big mahogany desk, which failed to dwarf

his solid proportions, absorbed in files and legal papers, he would look the very embodiment of common sense and well-rewarded shrewdness. And presently he would give her a small white envelope, addressed to Hope, and, putting on his hat, go out suddenly, without looking at her.

Later, Hope would take the note, read it with quick carelessness, nod, and speak of other things. Or she might telephone to Allen Kirby, and tell him she could not see him that evening. Then Mary would laugh, and Hope would join her very gaily. Sometimes she merely tore up the missive and said, "Oh, bother!"

The day before, she had said, as if to herself, "All right," and sat awhile thinking. Mary went away. She was not a mind-reader, or she might have remained to remonstrate. Later, she imagined Hope tearing through the night in the black and brassy eighty-horse power monster with Allen Kirby gravely at the wheel and Edgerton tangling himself up in meaningless words, trying to explain to Hope things about them both which neither understood. In reality that young lady was curled up cross-legged on the deep-red carpeted floor of Edgerton's rooms, beside an open suit-case, neatly folding an assortment of cheerful neckties and carrying on a desultory conversation with the owner of them.

"Did anyone see you coming?" had been his first apprehensive question as he closed the door sharply behind her.

"No, I guess not," she replied carelessly. "Do you mind?"

"I?" he said, and stared at her. But he was aware of the extraordinary recklessness of women. "I don't think I should have let you come here."

"But it's cold out," she argued. "And I can't have

anyone where I live. Besides, I wanted to see. Your room looks like you."

It did, being large and substantially comfortable, but without originality. There were no books; she commented on that, roaming about and tossing aside a newspaper or so disdainfully. She tried the big leather chairs, and presently insisted on helping him pack. He was going on the midnight train, to be absent a month or more.

It was characteristic of him to have these expensive rooms. He had furnished them himself; the small, rather shabby hotel annoyed him, and the cost was a matter of indifference to him. But he did think he ought not to have let her come here. He had asked her to appoint a place. Allen told him the car was out of order. She had suggested his office; mere hospitality had prompted this alternative. He felt rather strange when she assented immediately; he didn't know what he felt until she entered, and then he had expressed everything in that first question. He thought of his own daughter. And he made a vow that if ever she needed him he would stand back of her. What else could you do for a girl?

It gave him a wistful delight to see Hope stroll about, half tiptoe, touching this and that. When she came near him once, he put his arms about her timidly, and gave her a clumsy caress. She squirmed away, laughed, and prodded his broad chest with a slim finger.

"Aren't you fat?" she teased irrelevantly. "I dare say you wouldn't feel it if I tried to beat you."

But he did feel it. Good heavens, to be over forty, and have sweet and twenty laugh at one! Then she folded his expensive silk shirts and socks, his innumerable ties, his fine linen handkerchiefs, with the care of a child-keeping house, and made herself very busy,

and said she was sorry he was going. His trunk was enormous; she said she could get into it, and proved the fact. The extent of his wardrobe filled her with frank amazement. People, she reflected, were very interesting, when one saw them thus at first hand, surrounded by the evidences of their own taste and personality. This was so unlike her own room; a bare little cell, with queer sketches of her own on the walls, one small battered trunk, a highly uncomfortable chair, an imitation couch covered with real cushions, and a pair of Japanese clogs pathetically toeing toward each other in the centre of the room. They were always in the centre of the room, never neatly arranged against the wall. How out of place he would be there! It made her laugh. But he broke in on her thoughts. He had been pacing up and down, lighting and throwing away cigarettes, watching her.

"Are you going to college?" he asked, at last, abruptly.

Her own answer surprised her a little, for she said involuntarily:

"No." And was sorry she felt forced to say it, for he looked generously disappointed.

"Then what can I do for you?" he asked finally.

To that she had no answer.

This refusal had crystallised suddenly in her mind, as the result of long, rather inchoate reflection. Dimly she perceived that college would not give her what she wanted. The end of college would be simply the end of college, not the beginning of anything else. She was seeking her youth, not trying to give it up, to college or anything. What had college given to Mary? She would have read more books. She could read them anyway. She would still have her start to make; the start for that indefinable goal, the heart of life itself.

His disappointment was evident. He lit another cigarette, threw it away, and stood irresolute. She jumped up and ran to him.

"Never mind, never mind," she comforted him. "It was lovely of you. And I have no sense at all," she concluded gravely.

"Not a bit," he agreed. "I think I'll put you in my trunk again, and carry you about, and look after you. Oh, Hope!" He crushed her in his arms, ruffling her hair and temper, smothering her.

She felt cross, and sorry for him, all at once; aware of a conflict within him, but not alarmed. That *beauté du diable* which she still possessed in its freshest bloom drew him powerfully by the double bonds of tenderness and passion, and he suffered more than she could have guessed. It divided his soul and body like a sword, and he did not know himself what shook him so. Before now he had sought refuge from his wife's perverse coldness in the favours of other women, women of the world; had taken carelessly what they had given freely, and forgotten. But he had never experienced anything like this extraordinary recrudescence of half-forgotten boyish emotions.

Nor was it solely her youth that drew him. After all, youth could be bought in the market, like any other commodity.

He never held her but he knew she wished to be free; the inner resistance was there, even while instinct or courtesy kept it from expression. But he did know she did not evade him to enhance her value, like those shrewder creatures who can drive a bargain from the cradle. Like his wife.

Not that he had these thoughts. Only a part of his brain was active; the part which he used in the making of money. He trained that.

He kissed the crest of her hair, while she sighed

ostentatiously and was rigidly unresponsive, repulsing him with her mind rather than with her body. So he let her go. She went out. He heard the soft click of her high heels down the hall, and hoped fervently that no other ears might be listening.

There was no warmth in his heart at the prospect of going home. He finished packing, and locked up his baggage, feeling singularly alone. His wife probably would not be at home; she might be in town, shopping, or visiting; she loved living in huge hotels in a glare of publicity. Ten days before he had sent her a wonderful sapphire ring for their wedding anniversary. She had not even acknowledged it. She was not a beautiful woman, nor charming, nor brilliant, but her very hardness had given her a long ascendancy over him. Despite himself, he was essentially a faithful man, craving affection, easily rebuffed. And there is something in the name of wife that gives a woman possession of certain keys to a man's inner nature, if he has anything fine in him at all. She was his wife, and in his young manhood he had given her those keys. Nor can any gift be wholly revoked; the period of possession can never be effaced.

His daughter was the only thing he had got out of it all—a jolly little tomboy, slowly changing now into an unusually frank and lovable young woman. Perhaps she could come with him on his next trip. It might save him from—he did not know quite what. From trying, perhaps, to thrust unwelcome gifts on another than his wife.

Now why would not Hope accept? He could not see that it was, over again, his giving her the dollar. She could not buy anything with it. She wanted chocolates, and could not reach the market. But this time neither could he buy them for her. And yet it was a perfectly good dollar he was offering her. If

it puzzled her, it puzzled him still more. He thought her exquisitely foolish—the more lovable for her imbecility. He was the acquisitive type. He refused nothing of value, reached out always for more, no matter whether he could buy anything with his dollar or not.

Well, it was train time. With a final thought of her, a fatuous hope that she slept sound, he went out.

Though he could not know it, she was far from sleeping. The car was miraculously recovered of its late affliction. It streamed through the night like a wandering earth-bound star; the pale-grey, dusty road rushed into its devouring radius of light and was instantly swallowed again by the dark, endlessly, a delight and a fascination to Hope. She was at the wheel, and Allen, beside her, kept a ready hand to correct the errors of her fearful joy. He must reach his arm about her to do it, but she had grown accustomed to his quiet presence and it did not trouble her. They talked, intermittently, cheek to cheek so they might hear. Once she turned suddenly and felt his long lashes brush her face, and laughed. She liked Allen, and one reason was his forthright honesty, which credited hers, so that they stood on firm ground with each other. He gave her less disquiet than any man she ever knew. He was not stolid, either; he merely controlled himself as perfectly as he did the big machine. In their expeditions they found themselves in perfect accord, intent on the one thing, the magic of the moment's chance. Their speech had the awful candour of utter, uncalculating youth.

To-night he knew she had been saying good-bye to Edgerton.

"Kinda mean of me," he meditated, "to sneak the car his last night. Only a block to the station, though. Did he say anything about it to you?"

"How did you know I was there?" she asked, skidding abruptly into a rut.

"Telephoned—you were out. Waited for you. I followed you home." He laid a restraining finger on the wheel.

"Well, you shouldn't have. *That* was mean."

"Oh, shucks! I knew you went there sometimes." His drawl accepted the fact without comment, reprobation or innuendo.

She shook her head. "Never did, before. This is more fun."

"Aren't you his girl?" questioned Allen directly.

"His girl? No, I don't think so. He's been nice to me. I like him, of course. How do you mean?"

"The limit," said Allen.

She took it in presently. It came to her in the light of a problem. Why should he have thought so? Not being a hypocrite, she made no pretence of anger. Though she did not realise it, that was because of Allen's acceptance of her right to her own choice. Because he had never made it an excuse to be hatefully presumptuous. But why——?

She asked him.

"Oh, well—he likes you, too. And he doesn't get on with his wife. And he hasn't got a girl here." This was elemental logic with a vengeance. But the force of it could not appeal to any unawakened girl.

"Well, I don't see," she murmured vaguely. "I think he's nice. He is to me. Has he got——"

"Sure, he's all right," said Allen. "He had a girl in St. Paul, I believe. But that was awhile ago."

"I'm not his girl," affirmed Hope.

"All right," said Allen. Allen played the cards as they fell. "I believe you, if you say so. You can't ever tell. I wish you liked me."

"I do," she said instantly.

"Oh, shucks!" said Allen. "You're a funny girl, aren't you?" And he retreated into silence for a time.

"You talk," she said finally, with a rather hopeless air, "as if one had to——"

"Oh, well, not just exactly that," he admitted. "But—life's pretty lonesome. . . . I like a girl . . . near me. . . . I used to know a lot of chorus girls in Chicago; jolly kids. . . .

He was sufficiently explicit, until she mutely signed "enough." Yet there was something primitively clean in his confession. She regarded him with utter astonishment, unaware that she had often aroused the same sentiment in him.

"I think *I* rather like being alone, mostly," she said at last.

"Sure, I know," he assented. "I can feel it. You're away off. You're a funny girl."

It was two o'clock. And there was her front gate.

CHAPTER VIII

THE dressing-room was uncomfortably crowded; Hope found herself in a corner, remote from a mirror and reluctant to take off her wrap lest her assurance should go with it. The dreadful feeling of being alone in a crowd assailed her; she felt gooseflesh rising on her bare shoulders, and looked about despairingly for Mrs. Patten and Mary. They had promised to be there, and were late. Eleanor Travers nodded casually, and went on powdering her nose. Mrs. Shane appraised her with a long, insolently inexpressive look and then turned, with an air of contempt, and adjusted her gown over her hips with a slight wriggling movement. Hope decided she would be no more beautiful for seeing her own reflection once more, and made her way to the door.

While she waited, drawing on her gloves, she could see Ned Angell at the door of the other cloak-room, evidently not yet expecting her; he had his hand on the shoulder of another youth, and they were both laughing, but in a confidential manner, as over a private joke. So it was, rather, though of course Hope could not know; they had just returned it to Ned's topcoat pocket. Ned was in flannels, as were many of the younger men; he even had a cummerbund instead of a waistcoat, but he carried off his dandyism extremely well, as a few men can, by appearing unconscious of it. Hope thought she had never seen anyone look quite so "finished" as he did; she even forgave him for wearing a seal ring on his little finger, and that his hand was too small for a man's. His mouse-coloured hair,

brushed very sleek, had a high light to it, like lacquer. He looked incredibly useless and gay; and was both. But for a cavalier at a dance, he was all one could ask, and more, Hope felt, than one so country-cousinish as herself had a right to. Now he saw her, and came across the room, and carried her off on his arm.

Inside the ball-room, a long bare apartment meagrely festooned with dusty-looking bunting and forlorn strings of Japanese lanterns against a glaring white wall, she hesitated again, not knowing whither Ned was guiding her but aware of some immediate duty on his mind. He was taking her to the patronesses, and she stumbled her way past them in an agony of embarrassment, tearing a flounce on the sharp heel of her slipper as she bowed to them. She got another glance of appraisal there, from Mrs. Dupont, who was Cora Shane's bosom friend—a simile which in that respect implied an amplitude of affection on the part of both. A new girl to them was a thing to be considered. Mrs. Dupont, who looked like a Spanish beauty well past her prime, dealt in masculine “futures,” and was gowned from Paris. Ned Angell had bored her with accounts of Hope. It gave her and Cora a certain satisfaction to perceive the girl, on her entrance, a dim little thing, obviously *gauche*.

Dim she was, gasping for breath, like a fresh-landed minnow, in her new element. Ned could not strike a spark from her, and he did like coruscations, fireworks. A part of Hope's prettiness was her waxen delicacy of complexion; even her mouth was only pink. When she felt dashed or ill it was as if a fine grey-ash had fallen on her. It fell on her now; she looked forlorn, and the odd gown she had chosen, admirably suited to her glowing mood, seemed sombre. It was of black lace, and her slippers were of blue satin; a ridiculous blue rose blossomed on her shoulder; a black chiffon

band encircled her head, with a fluffy bow that was meant to be perky. It had slipped a bit, and sat over one eye, making her look lost and neglected, but very quaint. Ned, beside her, felt humorously despairing. He would have to hand her over to the men she must dance with like—like a sick kitten, instead of permitting them the privilege. He did not apply the epithet harshly; no one could feel harsh toward a poor little sick kitten.

He wondered why she attracted him at all. Sometimes so did she. Undoubtedly the attraction existed; more, perhaps, in her absence than otherwise. He always went back to her, as if to look at her once more and confirm a previous impression, or perhaps hoping that at last she might realise some subtle anticipation. That she literally never heeded him at all, neither his comings nor his goings, was part of the charm. He could not imagine her waiting for him, even unconsciously. During an interim she would go on about her own affairs, just being herself. And it might be she would develop a new phase, and he ought not to miss it. He had had so many love affairs of all kinds, he was not sure but this was a new kind—when he was away from her.

They danced the first together, of course; her blue satin shoes were light on the floor, at least. As her card was not half-filled, he left her then to remedy the matter. She subsided into a seat, pale, but evidently of stoic courage. She was looking at the patronesses, with a touch of sly deliberation in her eye, when Mary and Mrs. Patten found her and swept down on her with subdued rustlings and laughter. It was charming to see her eyes at once darken and light up and the animation flow back to her face. The missing colour note was supplied to her tonal ensemble. And she wanted to kiss Mary and Lisbeth; her eyes

said it, her mouth said it, without words. That kissing expression was what made Tony Yorke, who had been watching her with mingled pity and amusement, get up from his chair and go in search of Ned. He decided suddenly he wanted to be presented to her.

"Thank heaven," Hope was saying to Mary. "Now I want you to impress all these people indelibly on my mind by telling me something horribly scandalous about each of them. Begin with the patronesses."

They did begin with the patronesses, who represented every shade of the town's evolution toward "society," as Mary explained. From Mrs. Manners, small, withered, terrifically dignified in her venerable Vandyke gown of black velvet draped with real, if soiled, old lace—who had brought her county traditions with her from England along with the gown and preserved them inviolate through twenty years of struggle with the rawness of a frontier town—to Mrs. Lockwood, a walking advertisement of her husband's trade as to avoirdupois, and his prosperity as to diamonds, they presented a complete social microcosm.

"Who," asked Lisbeth, "is that small fair woman with Mrs. Lockwood? Have I ever seen her before?"

"Perhaps not; she is only visiting. Mrs. Lockwood caught her in Banff. She," Mary smiled, "is a lady-in-waiting to the Queen of Norway. Now she's talking to Amy Bell; the Bell girls used to peddle milk, and I always fancy Amy carries her muff like a quart measure!"

"Cat!" said Hope. "Go on!"

But Ned interrupted, with a tall, dark-eyed young man in tow, who looked at her with an air of recognition.

Her name he knew; his mind always placed an interrogation point after it. He had seen her times innumerable. It was characteristic of the difference

in them; she had seen him, consciously, just once. He knew what she did; vaguely, where she came from; very definitely, what she looked like; and not at all what she was. He had always been curious about her, but only now in a personal way. At first he had thought of her as "a girl Ned Angell took about"; later she was "the girl with the feet"; because of her light and happy way of hurrying along. Then he had seen her in Edgerton's car. Now Tony Yorke was the child of his age, an unconscious worshipper of success. Edgerton's interest in Hope—whatever nature it partook of—invested her with a sort of value, a speculative value, one might say. There must be something in her. And Edgerton and Ned Angell—extraordinary combination! She must be a queer little devil.

He reserved judgment, in the way men do; a way that allows them to feel very generous, since such a reserved judgment is tantamount to no more than a suspended sentence. Even admitting the worst, she must be one of those really rare women who wear their rue with a difference. Edgerton's manner to her convinced him of that. It did not quite convince him of anything else. In respect of Ned Angell, their presence here did convince Yorke; he could have echoed Mary Dark's dictum from that—she must have snubbed Ned! But Edgerton was different; he was a big man in his way, and would act like one. Well, there was the situation. He rather wanted to be on the inside of it all, and was quite willing to grin with her at Ned. But, after all, it was that sudden look of hers made him forget every other reason, and simply wish to meet her because he did wish to meet her. And, his vision clear for a moment, he saw both Ned and Edgerton explained in himself. But unfortunately such moments of clairvoyance, do not last.

For one thing, few of us are willing to admit in cold blood that we are just exactly like other people.

His moment lasted the evening, at least. Hope, looking up suddenly, smiled straight into his eyes, and held out her hand, quite unnecessarily.

"But I know you," she said, and thought at the moment she was telling the truth. So she rose and let the music carry her away with him, without even looking back at Mary and Lisbeth Patten.

Falling in love is not a faithfully descriptive phrase. One soars up to love as to a sunlighted pinnacle above a world of grey fog. Wings of enchantment are lent for the occasion. The kingdoms of the world are spread out before the transported victim, who promptly spurns them. The falling occurs subsequently.

Then the bruised and bleeding creature who so lately was a god sits painfully for a while estimating injuries, and presently begins to pick up the pieces. Generally it is found they can be got together in workable shape, with considerable effort, but nothing will ever be quite the same again. But if the real gods have had pity, they have surreptitiously put a grain of common sense into the new mixing, so that the next time love is achieved step by step, as an Alpine climber mounts, and one takes pains to make love a little footing at the very top, where it may rest secure.

But the reason why anyone falls in love cannot be told, for it is different in every case.

Tony Yorke had charm—a gift that no man has a right to. That is because he can go to the woman he desires and plead his own cause with no more shame than his conscience puts on him. A woman needs charm to bring her choice to her. When some wicked godmother gives it to a man she means mischief. It is an alien element and breeds trouble. By virtue of that misplaced quality, Tony Yorke could not look at a

woman without his glance telling her that she was of all the world the one person he would rather spend the next hour with. He also looked at her as if they were sharing some rather amusing secret, only they two, against all the world.

When he gave Hope that reassuring, confidential message with his eyes, hers answered with the same joyful intelligence. She believed every word he did not say. She dragged from the recesses of her soul all the garments of romance that had been hidden there for almost all the years of her life, and in the space of one evening neatly cut and fitted them to his outward measure and hung them about him willy-nilly. And with a sweet shameless pride she did not care if the whole ball-room knew it.

As a matter of fact, no one knew it. She did not know it herself. It is the obvious thing escapes the world longest. Even Ned Angell felt rather glad that Hope had brightened up. She quite did him credit, though he did feel a slight, indefinable unease. Perhaps because he had at last found the expected, unexpected different phase in her.

He looked at her closely when he took her to supper, or as closely as he could. Ned was the least bit muddled. Hope knew he drank sometimes; but she had never before had direct evidence of it. He had the conventional decency for that. But now she was absent-minded, and he saw it, and wanted to attract her attention; he talked louder than was his wont. Eating her cold chicken placidly, and aware through her lowered lashes of every turn of Tony Yorke's head at the far end of the long trestled table, where he sat with Cora Shane, Hope woke to a sudden horrified consciousness of what Ned was saying. More, she felt what he was about to say; what he had said was nothing.

"Ned," she said, in a low voice that was like a splash of cold water, "be quiet." Or I shall leave the table."

It stopped him on a word; he bit Mrs. Shane's name in two like a cherry, and was silent. Hope looked about swiftly. No one else had noticed. She looked at Ned. He was sulking, wearing an air of injured innocence. His smoothly-shaven cheek and shining hair, his immaculate shirt-front and cuffs, everything about him so clean and orderly and daintily nice, contributed to that expression; and all these things he had in common with everyone who sat there, eating, drinking, laughing; and all these things, somehow, seemed to make what he had been saying absurd. These people, outwardly so carefully composed, in painting phrase—they did not look as if there was any evil in them any more than Ned did. But he had made her, for one rather horrible moment, fancy a skeleton at the feast, a skeleton for every feaster. It was as if each who supped had a skeleton *beneath* the table, held firmly underfoot, and Ned had wantonly tried to drag one aboveboard. Hope saw the world in a glimpse. Then she looked, openly, at Tony Yorke. There was something so frank about his smiling eyes, his fresh, tanned face. He looked *good*. She breathed freely again. He met her gaze, and telegraphed her a quick message. The next? She nodded.

They did not dance together. Instead, moved by a common impulse toward solitude *à deux*, they found an extraordinary little dusty stairway leading into the darkness of the roof, at the upper end of the hall, and sat there on Tony's handkerchief, peering through the half-open door at the dancers, like an audience of two looking on at the pageant of life, asking no more than each other. It was draftily cool there, but they did not feel it. Hope drew the tail of her lacy gown over

her shoulders; an unnecessary precaution. His mere presence warmed her; his sleeve touching her bare arm; more, the light in his eyes when, speaking, they bent their faces close in such a movement as preludes a kiss. They bantered each other a little; she loved to see him laugh, because he wrinkled his nose a trifle and looked as if everything were much funnier than one dared to acknowledge openly. She was so immensely light-hearted on a sudden; and it seemed, absurdly, to have something to do with the way his hair grew off his temples—she loved his hair. No doubt Delilah wept when she put the shears to Samson, for every woman has a weakness for that thick, springy hair which seems to denote youth and vitality in a man. And she loved the laughter in his eyes.

Ah, she loved the gay and gallant spirit she read into him, of which these were the visible signs. But he loved only the softness of her mouth, the virginal delicacy of her low bosom where it sloped gently under the shadowy lace, and her delicious, remote nearness. His fine senses gauged her; he knew at once that hers slept, or only stirred in sleep, while yet her spirit reached invisible, fearless tendrils toward him. He was ~~not~~ sensual; he was sensuous, fatally open to either appeal. There was a brief conflict in his mind, while past conclusions battled with present conviction; for she was not at all what he had thought her, but she might yet be many things. How would the die fall? That he meant to see.

The dance was a romp. Mrs. Shane played, for it was an extra. They could see her, face averted carelessly from the keyboard, strong, supple hands commanding the keys with splendid precision. She too was watching the dancers.

"Look," said Tony softly. "That's her husband!"

He passed his wife with Mrs. Dupont in his arms. Her regal height dwarfed the little man; his stout bow legs bore him gallantly, moving with a deft precision that gave the final touch of burlesque. In his wife's eyes was a complete, impersonal appreciation of every detail of his appearance, a terrible and humorous appraisal, and a sort of mild and perpetual and—yes, wicked astonishment. He was her husband! Her fingers were little devils, casting nets for the enchanted feet of her auditors; like the children of Hamelin, they leaped to her playing, without volition. Cora Shane was a genius in her way, and her way was the playing of popular music. So she played, and her husband danced, a figure of fun to the world. Tony laughed quietly. It amused him a great deal. Such things did. Even while he was most aware of Hope beside him. She was watching, also.

"They're funny, aren't they?" she said.

Yet she did not see what he saw; to her they were funny in an entirely different way, merely as human beings, and in the sight of Heaven. But he was comparing what he saw with what he knew. She forgot them; the figures on the floor became only a pretty tapestry, of dark heads and fair, powdered shoulders, trailing satins, masses of clear black and white. She and Tony were alone, ringed about in a fairy circle. To have stayed like that for ever, just so closely, barely touching. Even a handclasp would have been too much. It was strange, but he knew all her mind. He made her tell him about herself a little. He even spoke of Edgerton, and of Ned, and watched for her colour to change, and it did not.

The figures on the floor wove and shifted. A couple, nearing their hiding place, swung out of the measured rhythm; the man stooped, handed a recovered handkerchief to the girl, and paused a moment, his

face full to them. Hope leaned forward, suddenly tense, and her upper lip lifted.

"Who is that?" she asked very softly.

"Which? Oh—Jim Sanderson. Know him?" Tony turned to her, noting that her cheeks had now the distress signal he had tried to provoke earlier.

"No," she said, still softly, with a definite note that was like the closing of a door. "Do you?"

"Long time," answered Tony. "He's a pretty good scout."

She did not answer, and he spoke of something else and forgot momentarily.

"I've cut a dance," said Hope presently. "Ned will be furious. And there's a man looking for me. I forget his name, but duty must be done!"

"You will give me one more, later," he said, not questioningly.

They rose, more than half reluctant. She turned her face up to him.

"I like you," he said, with the naïveté whereby he won women.

"I like you, too," said Hope, in a breathless whisper, and stooped through the little door.

A distracted-looking youth came up and bore her off.

The dance was nearing an end when Tony claimed her again. Just as the music drew them together, she heard Tony speak, and turned her head to look full into Jim Sanderson's eyes. This time her face did not change at all; but her own eyes gave the effect of looking through a mask. Her head turned again slowly away from him. Tony was aware of some subtle by-play, saw Sanderson check a forward step, nod, and vanish into the crowd. But the echo in his ears of that closing door was plain. And, suddenly, he felt her small gloved hand grip his arm tightly.

She touched him much as a child clings to its

mother's skirt as a talisman against unformulated dangers, assuring herself of the solid presence of her newly-elected knight. That he could not know, but there was something confiding in her clasp; it moved him not unpleasantly. His arm encircled her again; in silence they slipped into the maze.

"I shall see you again," he said, as he left her finally.

"Shall you?" she asked.

She did not try to bind him to a meeting. She was happy in an extraordinary way that asked nothing more. She had found him; she knew he was. That was enough. Besides, it was not in her hands. He had come; he would come again if Fate pleased. If not, he would not come. In either case, she believed: for her creed of romance had been made visible.

She did not hear one word Ned said to her, going home.

Nor did she hear what Mrs. Shane said to Mrs. Dupont as they lingered for a cigarette in the half-deserted dressing-room while the band played a final, extra extra.

"Who is she, anyway?" Cora's voice was languid.

"Ask Tony," suggested Mrs. Dupont, in the same clipped, throaty tones. "They must have told each other the story of their lives while they sat out those three dances. I haven't seen him rush a girl like that since—you came back!"

"Tony's a fool," remarked Cora, in the manner of one who depreciates for form's sake a treasured belonging, as the Chinese do. Her friend's implication did not displease her. "If we've got to meet her, we ought to know something——"

"Well, I'll ask him," said Mrs. Dupont agreeably. "I'm going motoring with him to-morrow. Oh, didn't you know?"

"“I said he was a fool,” reiterated Cora. And her resolve hardened.

They kissed and parted. But only Mrs. Dupont laughed as she went out. She had scored—twice.

CHAPTER IX

A FOOL'S paradise is quite as good as a philosopher's heaven—while it lasts. And while there is a vast difference in essence between mere credulity and the trust engendered of good faith, the result is too often quite the same. Julie de Lespinasse has not been reckoned wanting in wit, but she never, even on her death-bed, perceived the asses' ears of her utterly selfish and unmanly lover. Hope was not another Julie, but neither was she a fool. Indeed, she followed a very ancient wisdom, knowing that

"The lovers that disbelieve
Evil speaking shall grieve,
And false witness shall part."

But it is too true that there is no wisdom that will serve as a cloak for all weathers. And Hope was not weather-wise.

She and Mary Dark were living together. They took the half of a house from an old friend of Mary's; Mrs. Hamilton by name. They had three rooms, transformed into a separate apartment, furnished with grass chairs and cushions and bookcases mainly, with a rag rug on the floor, chintz curtains, and a desk and drawing-board. The desk Mary kept in her bedroom, so she might sit there and read and write and smoke cigarettes if Hope had guests. They had a geranium in a pot and fussed over it with ineffectual pleasure. Hope settled herself in the new rooms like a cat on a hearthrug. Watching her darning stockings, or sketching, or running ribbons through her *lingerie*,

Mary felt the same tender amusement one derives from the antics of a kitten or a puppy. But sometimes, when Hope had one of her rare restless fits, and prowled about softly, touching things here and there or standing with her face pressed to the window-pane looking down the dusty street, Mary's heart misgave her. She connected it readily with Tony Yorke's visits. He had called more than once. Ned Angell came much oftener, taught Hope the guitar, and sang to her, but Hope received him exactly as she did the three boisterous Hamilton children.

Mrs. Hamilton was a remarkable woman, said Mary briefly, and left Hope to discover the meaning of the phrase. It was not too difficult. Mrs. Hamilton, without a grain of intellect, possessed a steady intelligence, a deep simplicity, and that genuine sweetness of soul which St. Paul defines as charity. She knew very few people and cared not at all; she went out but little, did her own housework, kept her own counsel and that of her friends, and was sincerely fond of the two girls without in the least desiring to regulate their conduct or inquire into their affairs. Her children were kept in order, and brought more pleasure than annoyance.

Mary had few callers, though she went out a good deal. Occasionally Hope was asked, also, but the thought of a gathering filled her with dumb misery. Eleanor Travers had been to call on both girls; there was a faint undercurrent of alarmed curiosity in her manner, struggling with an instinctive liking for Hope. Mary had watched her with a lazy smile. Hope felt baffled; then dismissed the remembrance, and was glad Miss Travers was out when she returned the call.

Once she asked Allen Kirby to the house. He came readily, and was obviously ill at ease. She was "away off," indeed. It was not the same girl who received

him in a trailing gown and offered him chocolate in a fragile little cup as she who came flying out in short skirt and jersey, to scramble into the big car and crowd the engine to the limit of its capacity through the adventurous dark.

Tony caught her in yet another phase. He came unexpectedly, when she thought he had forgotten. If he had never come, he would in time have become a sort of private legend to her.

Mrs. Hamilton let him in, but did not trouble to announce him. He found Hope a little dishevelled and fatigued, in a ruffled print house-frock, holding the Hamilton baby on her knee and telling him stories, with a slightly absent air. She was hardly thinking of the stories; her mind was really occupied pleasantly with the aspect of the room, which she had just dusted and set in order. The geranium glistened from a late watering, sitting in the window where it caught the last daylight. The baby, with an expression of serious rapture, repeated after her such phrases of the story as caught his ear, and pored attentively over certain pictures Hope had drawn to make it clear to his youthful mind. She and Mary amused themselves so at times. The stories Mary wrote, and Hope sketched for them as they progressed. When they were finished, the girls tore them up, or allowed them to accumulate in odd corners.

Hope did not rise at his entrance, but offered him her hand, still clutching little Bobby with a kind of desperation, and terribly conscious of her tumbled hair. Bobby had pulled it down into her eyes, and her collar was unfastened, and she felt too confused to correct either negligence. It would have been like decking herself for his approval, and she wanted him, somehow, to accept her as "a poor thing, but his own," without garnishment.

"How domestic you look," he said, laughing.

"But I am horribly domestic," she assured him.

He laughed again, and insisted on hearing the rest of the story, looking at her sketches with real interest and some amazement, such as most of us feel when one we know displays a talent, however slight. Achievement, to the majority of us, seems to be possible only to persons we do not know; super-beings, not accessible in daily life.

"But you're alarmingly clever," he said, to her great embarrassment.

She clutched Bobby till he squirmed, and murmured, "No, no," very positively. Then the baby insisted on being let go; she led him to the door, came back and sat down tentatively. She felt as if she must entertain Tony, although she herself wished merely to sit and see him opposite her. But she must have talked of something, for they laughed a great deal in the next half-hour, and at the end of it he was sitting beside her on the cushioned wicker settee. The awkwardness had passed.

Tony Yorke enjoyed life because he never knew exactly what he was going to do, and so suffered no disappointments, while at the same time everything had for him the flavour of novelty. He had not meant to make love to Hope when he set out to see her, but neither had he any resolution formed against it. He followed the line of least resistance. When he touched her hand in taking a match from her fingers, he had not meant to retain it, but he did. It lay in his, submissive and yet uncertain; and then he captured the other one and drew her toward him. It was dusk now; she had not put on the lights, but her clear yet clouded blue eyes, fixed on his, had an illumination of their own, and her hands were pearly white in his brown ones. She said nothing as he bent to her, but

watched him, and he waited on her word, ready to release her, even while he still drew her closer. Then her eyelids fell softly, and he knew he was going to kiss her.

And when he touched her cool, trembling mouth he knew that, however incredible it would have seemed but an hour earlier, he loved her.

He had been aware of a kind of charm that had fallen on them at their first meeting, but had afterward put it down to the music, the excitement of the dance, the exotic atmosphere of an assemblage of young and light-hearted pleasure-seekers. Now, with her in his arms, he knew she had sounded the deeps of his nature—shallow water all, but all of him. He was essentially a lover of women, not of one woman, but at the least he loved them all for their fineness, and his own type of woman was not the type that touched him emotionally. Rather, perhaps, he was all things to all women—but himself first and last.

His tribute was the conventional one, but still again his best, and all he had, and even a little more. For he spoke of marriage, not that night, but the next time. And he knew quite well that, by his own standard, he could not afford to marry. Subconsciously, he had always expected to marry a girl with money. Not for her money, but it would just happen so. Yet he said, after Hope had come forward timidly and put her hands in his:

"I'm going to marry you, you know."

"Are you?" she said, and might have added, "'I have laid my life at thy feet; do as it please thee with it, for what shall please thee is sweet.'"

But neither then nor ever was she able to put into words to him all the romance and wonder he meant to her. No doubt they would be married; she had not really thought of that, although she had often con-

templated her own possible marriage before meeting him. One had to be born; one had to die; one had to be married also; these were the inevitable trilogy. And since marriage was the only one of the three in which the principal actor had any say, it lent itself generously to speculation. Very erratic speculation. But the fact is that, not out of lawlessness, but in keeping with its own laws, romantic love does not trouble about marriage. It can feed on moonlight, nourish itself on sonnets. So to Hope the idea of marrying Tony was quite by the way. But of course if he said so they would be married. That would not make any difference.

After he had gone, however, she treasured the words, as a guarantee of the permanence of her happiness. Him she had never doubted as loving her always, but an instinct as old as time and the changing seasons had warned her that this wonder would not last. Not any more does one expect spring to remain after its appointed period. Something, somehow, would come between them, and leave her only a memory. To this absurd tangle of "for ever" and "but a little while" Tony had brought the word marriage like a sword, and the knot was cut cleanly. He had spoken. He would overawe the face of Fate.

Mary noticed she no longer complained of the stagnation of life, though on the surface it was all the same. At hazard, Mary guessed correctly: being in love was itself an adventure, and all-absorbing. The impatience of her moments of waiting for Tony was not her old tugging at the leash. She even withdrew as far as possible what tentative feelers she had thrown out before. With Ned she was distraught to the point of rudeness. He tried to sulk. She did not even notice, and he returned, after telling Lisbeth and Mary in strict confidence that she was a disagreeable little

beast and that only his high regard for them made him tolerate her. She had always been high-handed with Allen Kirby, but Allen's philosophy permitted him to enjoy what he could get. He had never made any claims. He was always ready, if she had nothing better to do. And since she liked him very well, and he had accepted with equanimity her first tacit definition of their relations, she did not feel that they infringed upon Tony's possession of all that was herself.

But with Edgerton she was vaguely troubled, and seemed to be in a perpetual retreat. He felt her slipping away from him, half surmised the truth, but could put no name to the cause. Of her life he knew nothing except what she told him herself. And she had the straightforward reticence of the truthful. Clumsily he tried to hold her, accepting each rebuff with a dogged gentleness that made her feel pitiful toward him. At the same time she was at a loss to understand what he wanted. He had so much already.

Once she voiced the question to Mary. Edgerton had been to see her. He came but the once. The last time he had been in town she had put him off prettily, because she had an engagement with Tony. Her rudeness smote her; in answer to a note Mary had tossed in her lap, she had telephoned, told him to call. He had been strangely unwilling, though plainly he wanted to see her. But he came.

What she remembered most was the way his eyes followed her about the room, as if photographing every trivial gesture she made. When she gave him her hand he tried to take her in his arms, and she said "No, no," and avoided him. Afterwards, just as the first time, she shyly gave him her cheek to kiss, as an amende. But his uneasiness perplexed her.

"What is it?" she asked. "Aren't you comfortable? Have a cigarette. I'm going to make some coffee."

It seemed he did not want coffee, and she sat pondering him. "You're different," was all she could make of it.

"No, you are," he returned bluntly. "Well, I might have known it would come. I say——"

"Yes?"

"If—if anything goes wrong, if I can help you, let me know." And he was for going. "Oh, why?" she said gently. "It's early."

She held him by the lapel of his coat, looking up at him engagingly, and he would have kissed her again. But he knew too well she had nothing for him. And, after all, with a heavy heart he knew he had nothing for her.

"No, I must. I've got some things to see to. Emily, my daughter, is coming up. I want you to meet her."

"I should like to," said Hope bravely, concealing her horror and alarm at the idea of meeting a strange girl.

There was a certain incredibility, too, about his having a grown daughter. Hope had been bred to the old order. A man married was married, and that was the end of him. Edgerton, appearing always alone, had somehow in her mind extricated himself from that fixed position, and now it seemed she must replace him, and he really would not quite fit. He would not fit anywhere; that was the trouble. A man of his age. She had dissociated him from all that, his age, his circumstances, his very physical appearance, at last; she no longer felt inclined to giggle secretly at the spectacle of his grey hairs abasing themselves before her triumphant youth; and now she would have to laboriously recreate him in her mind. Actually, she never did. It would have comforted him to know that, strangely. But he never did know it.

After he had gone she interrogated Mary, as she had been wont to question Agnes.

"He must be worried about something," she said sagely, interrupting Mary's peaceful scribbling in the bedroom. "He seemed to be on pins and needles."

"It was me," said Mary, disregarding syntax, and further replied to Hope's stare. "He wondered where I might be; he feels rather silly before me. Did he ask?"

"No. Was *that* it?"

Mary nodded, smiling.

"Certainly. He could feel my eye gimleting through the keyhole. Wicked child, why don't you let that poor man alone!"

"I don't do anything to him," said Hope indignantly.

"Horrid little flirt," said Mary calmly.

"I am *not*!"

"No? What then do you want with all those men?"

Mary's voice, sweetly lazy and receptive, wooed to confidence.

"Only four," Hope protested. "I *don't* flirt with them. I"—she paused a long time—"Maybe you can understand. It's like this: there are so many things I'd like to do and see and feel, all at once; I should like to reach out in every direction. I wish the world were an orange and I could eat it——"

"An apple, you mean," murmured Mary. "Well?"

"When I hear of a strange country, I long to be there immediately," Hope pursued resolutely. "To read of some new discovery makes me wish I were at the inventor's elbow; to hear of a big adventure fills me with an awful longing to have experienced it. And I'd like to be a man; but I'd like to be a woman, too. Of course I simply can't have any of those things. But Ned and Allen and Con Edgerton and all of them"—she hesitated obviously over Tony Yorke's

name—"they're my foreign countries, my other lives. I explore them and watch them; I take some of their lives from them. Because they let me see themselves. So do you, maybe Lisbeth does; but no one else. People in a crowd aren't interesting. A crowd brings out points of resemblance; in extreme cases it turns into one creature, a mob! But that wasn't what I started to say, was it?"

"No," said Mary. "Never mind, *je vous comprends*. Yes—'But he who lives more lives than one, more deaths than one must die.'"

"I've died a million times here in the last two years," retorted Hope. "I think I'm getting used to it now."

"You don't fidget so much," agreed Mary. "But is that it? Is—it——?"

There was no answer.

"Aren't you engaged to Tony Yorke?"

Hope looked up quickly, her eyes round with surprise, a defensive blankness clouding them.

"Why do you ask that?" she parried.

"Because I have no manners," Mary smiled. "Now aren't you?" But her real reason she could not tell.

"Yes," said Hope, rosily shamefaced and a little proud. "But I'll never forgive you if you tell any one. You won't, will you?"

"Not unless you say I may," Mary hesitated. "But you ought to announce it. Did—did Tony ask you not to?"

"No, of course not," said Hope placidly astonished. "We never spoke of it. Who cares, anyway? No one would be interested, except maybe you and Lisbeth. And I don't want to be served up with the sandwiches at every afternoon tea from now till next year. If you tell I'll hate you!"

"As you say," agreed Mary, secretly resolved to alter that decision. "When shall you be married?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometime." Hope laughed happily.

"It will be never," said Mary to herself. But aloud she spoke, "I forgot to say the usual thing, my dear. But you know I hope you find the magpie's nest."

"What magpie's nest?" inquired Hope, round-eyed again.

"A *façon de parler*, dear; the French say happiness is to be found in a magpie's nest. Because the magpie always builds out of reach!"

Hope smiled to herself, with deep assurance.

"But I forgot to ask you," she said, "what *does* Mr. Edgerton want?"

Mary, in silent despair, refused to answer.

CHAPTER X

GOSSIP that builds up slowly, like accretions to a coral reef, is more dangerous and difficult than a rumour that runs like sudden flame in dry grass. That will burn itself out, and new grass grow. But the other remains, fetters its hapless object; unless it concerns one of unusual mental and spiritual stature, who can calmly rise clear and use it as a footing. And that takes time.

These tiny, ever-increasing tributes of idleness and malice Mary dreaded for Hope, saw them piling about her, and was helpless. Warn her? It would not help. The girl might struggle to amend, but wanted experience to perceive her error. She would be simply overwhelmed, frightened and sickened of the unprovoked baseness it would seem to show her in human nature. She had never injured anyone; lacking the flavour of reprisal, the attack would seem merely wanton. Hope still had that terrible sense of poetic justice discernible in young, and; unhappily, inarticulate children. She would see herself punished for an unintended fault. She would not know how to recover herself and strike back, and the wound would be poisoned thereby.

There was nothing to be done. And perhaps luck would incline the other way. If there was such a thing as fool's luck—well, Hope deserved it. She juggled her own fortunes as carelessly as if they were ivory instead of crystal.

Emily Edgerton's visit, though delayed, had materialised. She was much lunched and refreshed with

vast quantities of tea by the local ladies, but Hope had met her first. Emily was just eighteen, but tall and well-grown, attractive with health and good nature and her father's millions. She was brown, and rather pretty; brown eyes, brown hair, a few golden freckles, and a figure rounded from tennis and dancing. She was armed *point-de-vise* with that knowledge of security which is the portion of daughters of the rich. Hope wondered and envied. Mary understood, and wished Hope might have a few years of the same ease, to put her on her feet.

This was at tea, and they were planning some way to pass the evening without boredom—a difficult thing in that city. Nothing offered but a second-rate theatrical performance; it would undoubtedly be second-rate, since none others came so far from the centres of civilisation. But Edgerton and Emily professed themselves quite willing to take what chance there might be of a smile, and while he was thinking whom he might ask to complete the party—"I'd feel altogether too greedy, with three pretty women to myself," he said—Tony Yorke was observed on the veranda. He was brought in, like the wedding guests who were gathered in the hedges and by-ways; and the party was declared filled, for their box would not possibly hold more than five.

So they sat very splendidly in the stage box; there were only four boxes and they were all stage boxes. One could not see all that went on on the stage, but Mary said the audience was much more amusing anyway. From the other side of the house, Mrs. Shane nodded to Mary, scrutinised Hope through an opera-glass and smiled at Tony.

Tony and Mary tossed the ball between them at first. She knew him, heart and soul, reading him, perhaps, through another she had once known. But

she had grown clever now; so that he could not guess how clever she was. "A silly muddle," she was saying to herself before the evening was well begun, looking at Hope, slim and shrinking in her black gown, with drooped lids, so that Mary's eyes outshone her, and the rose of Emily Edgerton's cheek. With a little pang at heart Mary saw that Edgerton still turned to her. After all, he was twice the man Tony was; it had never been her surface that had caught him. For all his simplicity, he phrased himself very fleetly, apropos of what Mary did not catch.

"I can see through a ladder when there's a lantern on the other side."

"Well, daddy, I always told you I wasn't a ladder," remarked Emily cheerfully, and pinched his arm. That was about the depth of the conversation.

"Aren't you?" murmured Hope idiotically, and they laughed until Mrs. Shane heard them.

"Are you?" asked Tony very seriously, addressing Hope.

She rallied.

"Yes, I am," she declared. "Anyone can see through me, or put a foot on me." Her eyes acknowledged that he at least could.

"Your vocation," said Mary, "is evidently marriage."

"Marriage isn't a vocation," returned Hope lightly, swimming on the tide of her own frivolity; "it's an accident. And accidents never happen to me; I'm always on the verge of them, right under the chariot wheels, you may say, but some rude person always rescues me."

She avoided Tony's glance as she spoke. Another woman would have looked at him with coquettish denial of her words. Mary saw Hope's attitude in advance; what hurt and shocked her despite herself was that Tony too looked deliberately preoccupied and

gay. Ah, he should have been possessive, given himself away. He left his rightful part to Edgerton—who accepted it. It was a muddle, indeed.

"Oh, you'll marry," said Edgerton rather gloomily.

She shook her head, contradicting, with a little lift of her eyelashes at him.

"Why do you think so?"

But he did not seem able to say. Tony had fallen into a low-toned conversation with Emily Edgerton; Mary, smiling dreamily out over the orchestra, felt like an exceedingly exclusive audience. Tony had got Emily's fan, and they retreated behind it, and Emily dimpled and smiled—she was really rather charming, and Tony's eyes had not forgotten their old trick. "The next day?" Mary heard him ask. "Perhaps," said Emily. "Shall we all go?" She looked at the others. "If you like," said Tony gallantly.

Later, he confessed to himself that the idea of squiring a nursery chit for a whole afternoon's ride out to the big dam was rather boring—since she had *not* included the others, despite her query—but, hang it, she had been openly expectant of his pursuing the acquaintance. It was plain she had taken Tony's inclusion in the party as for her special benefit; Mary and Hope were her father's friends, and he was her sop, tribute of custom to the debutante, a man for her *vis-à-vis*. At eighteen, Emily had been practically "out" for a year, and knew her social dues. She thought it rather good of the other two women to leave Tony to her so unreservedly. Especially since he was so—well, so "nice." Her *summum cum laude* of masculine perfection was to be "nice." She was herself very nice indeed; and, if her world was all surfaces, she had some of her father's own qualities latent in her. Stirred by some singular prescience, toward the end of the evening Mary drew her out,

dropped a metaphorical noose over her—and had her ready to bring to hand later if she should need. What the need might be, she did not know yet.

Well, the evening was over. In the lobby Mrs. Shane captured them, pressed them to supper, all of them. It was Edgerton who did not want to go, and it was Mary who, having learned to read his Long Primer print very easily in her elbow-to-elbow working hours with him, made their excuses. It was Mary, too, who heard Tony promising that he might be there later. She grimaced, hiding it under her hood. Was a man so avid of the moment's distraction worth luring? But that was for Hope to settle, not her.

"We'll get enough of the Shanes to-morrow," said Edgerton bluntly to Mary. "We've got to dine with them."

Mary nodded. Shane was involved in Edgerton's latest deal, for the power rights on the Kenatchee Falls.

Dine they did, and Tony was at that dinner, too. He had been of the theatre party by accident; he was always at Mrs. Shane's dinners—Cora Shane said to all concerned that she needed him to mix the cocktails—and thereafter, because of the sheep instinct in people, he was everywhere asked where Emily Edgerton was asked, which was everywhere, merely because people knew of the two initial occasions.

If he had wished just such a development in the first instance, it was by no means on account of Emily herself. He needed the financial backing of Edgerton; he had staked all his own money, and some he had got from his mother, not an enormous sum, on the Kenatchee Falls deal, and without Edgerton's help, he might just as well have set it sailing down the Bow River in paper boats. Shane's backing could do no more than get him a hearing and give him a little

local prestige, for Shane, though growing rich as a small city counts riches, had many irons in the fire and needed all his loose capital for himself. But a word, a scratch of the pen, from Edgerton would unlock the vaults of any of the powerful banks; he could command money enough to dam the Bow with silver if he chose. He had more than money, he had credit; he was a man who never lost.

By sheer tenacity, the ability to play a waiting game, Edgerton had recouped himself time and again in deals where one less long-sighted would have given up and admitted defeat. And there were not a dozen men in the Northwest of whom so much could be said. Boom times do not breed shrewdness. Edgerton had not floated in on the tide of any boom; he had made his start a dollar at a time, and never forgot what a dollar cost in actual effort. He was the one man Tony Yorke wanted.

But it had to be soon. The franchise was already granted, passed but a few weeks before by a gratified Assembly at Edmonton. A provincial election impended within another twelvemonth, with a threat of an overturned government. The fear of that undesirable consummation had forced even the secret shareholders of the company, who sat in the Assembly, to assent to an obnoxious rider to the bill calling for certain work upon the power plant to be completed within the year—expensive work. There were ways, certainly, to obtain a postponement, but they were also somewhat expensive. They would be doubly so with a new provincial cabinet, hungry from enforced abstinence, to appease.

"With me," Shane told Tony frankly, "it's a gamble; and I'll have to pass up the next raise. I've reached my limit. But if we can get Edgerton—why, we'll just be taking over the bank, that's all. We'll have

the percentage on our side. I hope we can get him. But he's a singed cat for caution. And it's no use crowding him."

That was very well for Shane; he played within his means. But Tony had put all he had on the table; he *had* to win.

Pennington Yorke—that was his full name, though he had nearly forgotten it himself—had begun his financial education at the wrong end: he had learned how to spend money before he knew anything about making it. In four dizzy years at college he had dispersed the nucleus of a comfortable fortune. Thereafter he had been in the position of the Chinaman who went tobogganing, as he explained once to Hope: "Whizz-z-z—go down like helle—walk back six miles!" The walk was long, and he would dawdle by the way and follow side-paths that attracted him. And tactically he had made a mistake in coming West, lured by the fabulous tales of equally fabulous wealth to be picked up over night.

All his personal assets here were valueless: connections, charm, social polish he found quite useless in a place where the social order was just emerging from a pastoral democracy. Energy was wanted, for these people were laying foundations, not adding the last touches and decorations; he was as little needed as a mural painter would be when only the framework of a house is built, and his rewards were commensurate. True, he had friends; and from them he got friendship of a sort—just what he gave, in fact, which was just what he did not need. At home he could if he had chosen to be a little patient have come into his own; but he had no patience, and the West looked to him like an industrial faro game, where everything might be won on a single turn of the wheel—and nothing lost, if one had nothing to lose.

He had, certainly, got Shane's countenance and support. Mrs. Shane saw to that. She was bored a good deal; she and Tony had in common a million trifles and a large selfishness. Shane liked Tony too, but if Cora had disliked him, she would have seen to it that her husband shared her feelings. As it was, Tony told her all his affairs, or, at least, all his financial affairs, and she sympathised with him. Nothing is easier, when one does not have to suffer through those affairs. She had even tried to help him with Edgerton; it was one of her notable failures, and it stung, rather. She did not forget it, though she had the wit to leave alone the further conduct of the business end of matters.

Bred to the current social code, her smouldering resentment did not prevent her being entirely amiable and gracious toward Emily Edgerton. After the dinner, she contrived that Emily should pay her duty call without her father; no hard matter. Mrs. Shane lived in one of the streets of trees; her house, though small, had an inviting porch covered with vines. Within, the furnishings had the charm of comfort and taste in daily use. The three rooms stretching across the front were practically in one, and gave the needed setting for a grand piano at one end, a carved oak sideboard at the other, and deep soft chairs everywhere. There were flowers, great pink roses, nodding to their own reflection on the polished surface of the piano top. A darning basket, filled with silk stockings, beside them, in some curious way added the last touch necessary to express the mistress of the house. To Emily it looked elegantly Bohemian, and she was thrilled by Mrs. Shane's cigarette, tossed aside when she came in, but flagrantly burning, sending up delicate little blue spirals in betrayal.

Mrs. Shane rallied the girl, not too obliquely, about Tony Yorke, pumped her dry of all relevant and irrelevant information, filled up the vacancy with the pleasantest of impressions, and produced Tony, finally, as a conjurer brings a rabbit out of a hat. Tony himself had not at all expected to see Emily, but he supported the encounter with equanimity. Her quick blush at his entrance was not unflattering; naturally, he could not know what Cora had said not more than five minutes before. But they had had the pleasantest of rides, as Emily admitted by merely mentioning it: what a woman remembers is a good index to what she likes. On the whole, that sapient observation is no less true of men.

The half-hour following amused all three very much; Emily had all the *jeune fille's* pleasure in being almost shocked; Cora and Tony all the amusement of talking their own language over the head of an unconscious third party. And Tony told himself that after all Emily hardly deserved to be called a "nursery chit." Some day she would be a thorough woman of the world, and the reading of her unfulfilled promise was in its way as interesting as would be the contemplation of her final perfection. Bread and butter she might be as yet, but it was "the best butter." Besides, Tony had rather a liking for bread and butter, not unusual in a man who has sampled other and at times too pungent fare. It sharpens the palate, for one thing. Yes, Emily—Miss Edgerton, of course, in his audible address of her—had all the points, physical and mental. He found himself surveying with pleasure the fine, almost imperceptible curve in the line from under her arm to her slender hip; a rare beauty, which only the connoisseur observes. She had a well-turned wrist and ankle, too.

She was quite aware of his scrutiny, but did not

change colour; only surprise had brought that first blush. Quite naturally her truly innocent, girlishly immature mind set it down to honest admiration, perhaps dawning love. There is a stage of awakening consciousness, still clean of passion and therefore unshamed in the wildest flights of imagination, when youth perceives in every new acquaintance of the opposite sex a probable lover. The earthy substance in which love must root is ignored; Emily was saved the embarrassment of reading anything grosser into Tony's gaze. In fact, it was not there; he could take an almost impersonal pleasure in the sight of a pretty woman, as a work of art. And he was now preoccupied with Hope.

"I'll take you to the Falls next time," he told Emily, laughing. "It's only fifty miles."

"Sir, you go too far," answered Emily. "But—I rather should like to see them. Are they pretty? I believe I'll ask daddy to take us up in the car. That's where he's going to build the power plant, isn't it?"

"Very pretty," assented Tony, exchanging a glance with Cora Shane. "So he is going to, is he?"

"Why, I suppose so," said Emily carelessly. "He's always doing something; I'm sure I heard him speak of it. Shall we consider it settled—going there, I mean?"

"Both, if you like," said Tony. "You evidently have a good deal of influence with your father, young lady."

"He spoils me horribly," agreed Emily. "I always tell him he has no right to ruin my character just to gratify his own selfish pleasure in giving me things—and he does it just the same. He'll be waiting for me now; he *will* dine at six o'clock. Good-bye, Mrs. Shane." She gave her hand to Tony, and her eyes therewith.

They watched her graceful progress to the front gate, where Allen Kirby waited with the motor. She sprang into it, smiled and spoke to Allen, turned and waved her hand, and was borne out of sight, a little princess of democracy.

CHAPTER XI

AGINN fizz, quick, Tony," said Mrs. Shane, yawning and stretching out a trim pair of ankles. "She's a darling child—but ten minutes more and I'd have expired, a perfect lady to the last. *Dio mio*, to think that ten years ago I was just like her!"

"The grace of God has stretched a long way in ten years," said Tony cryptically, going to the sideboard.

She smiled vaguely, losing the allusion. When she smiled, Cora Shane was singularly sweet. The ten years seemed to melt into the dimple at the corner of her red mouth; the curve of her cheek was flawless; even her bulk—for she was a large woman—only gave her an infantile softness. And her lovely, lucent sapphire eyes seemed to gather a tender light. One forgot that she had an ugly nose and no waist-line.

"Oh, yes," she assented, musing. "Really, really, I was the *niciest* child. By the way, any progress?"

"Nothing new," said Tony. "Didn't friend husband report?"

"Yes, but you saw Edgerton afterwards. Pull hard, Tony. It means Europe for me. I don't want to wait three years, as I must if this falls through. Besides, I'd like to see you win."

"It's good to have a friend," said Tony, and, as she took the foaming glass, kissed her wrist.

It was only his way; she knew it—but she liked it.

"How I'll hate to give you up, Tony," she sighed.

"Well! Is Lent approaching?"

"Oh, don't be stupid. I was just thinking ahead.

This will cut your rope; you'll go away too, or marry. High time you did, and stop philandering. Seen Miss Fielding lately?"

She prided herself on her bluntness. And she did not miss the quick, calculating look he flashed at her.

"Oh, twice a day or so," he assured her jestingly. "Rather *à propos des bottes*, aren't you? You do get the weirdest hunches, Cora."

"I thought you might have, with the Edgertons," pursued Mrs. Shane coolly. "What do you make of that, anyway!"

"Of what?"

She shrugged.

"Oh, you know what people are saying. A man in his position, too! Men are all fools." Cora Shane even thought in *clichés*, which was why her set accounted her clever. To them cleverness was a formula.

"Guilty in general," said Tony. He was gazing at a pattern of the wall-paper. "But do be more explicit. Who's been doing what?"

"Really, how should I know? Eleanor Travers was here yesterday, and was absolutely up a tree about the invitations for their dance next week—you're going, of course. Someone had said something. Wanted to know if she should ask Miss Fielding. She has to ask the Edgertons, and Mary Dark, and Lisbeth Patten. Either way, she's afraid of committing a *bêtise*. I told her I'd ask the devil if I wanted. But I only shocked her." She laughed.

"But what did she hear?" said Tony gravely.

"I tell you I don't know. Jim Sanderson has some story; says he used to know her——"

"Jim?" said Tony, darkening. "Did he tell you so?"

"No. I had it all second, third, fourth hand. You ask him. And she goes out in Edgerton's car."

"What a rotten little hole this is," said Tony savagely. Because she did go out in Edgerton's car. Had he not seen her once? "She goes out with Miss Dark sometimes. In the motor, I mean. And she's known him for years. There's a clever girl, that Miss Dark. I believe she could almost swing this deal for us. The women here are all cats—saving your presence, ma'am." He wanted to turn it off lightly. And he wanted to hear more, if more there was.

"Oh, well, I have nothing against her," conceded Mrs. Shane handsomely. "She seems a queer little waif; I've never heard her say a word but yes and no. Ned Angell led us to expect an intellectual prodigy. And of course you know the—ah—cats have hung your scalp at her belt. Does she say *yes or no*?"

"Both, as you observed," returned Tony promptly, his surface unruffled. "Damn the cats!" So he sold her, with that kiss on Mrs. Shane's wrist ten minutes before. "She is clever, really; sketches the quaintest things."

"Why couldn't she turn the trick for you," asked Mrs. Shane amiably, "if Mary Dark won't? And then there's still another chance."

"Show it to me," said Tony.

"I said it was time you married. There's Emily. What more could you ask?" She studied him covertly.

"Cora, you will absolutely drive me to a blush," said Tony equably. He was inwardly conscious of a slight exasperation, a feeling that Cora was capable of forgetting good taste. "I could ask no more, and should get a great deal less. Why are you so set on springing the fatal trap on me? What have I done to *you*?"

"Stolen my young heart," said Cora, with a ringing

laugh. "Never mind; at my age it isn't serious. But if you had sat out three dances with me the first time I saw you, Heaven knows——"

He reddened.

She said no more. But, after he had gone, she was distinctly irritable, pondered over her dinner, and snubbed her husband until he took himself off to the club. And her own idle suggestion took root in her mind. Emily Edgerton—why not? Could he be such a fool as to be thinking seriously of Hope Fielding? A little outsider. That was her grievance, crystallised. Those who credited the report that she had a deeper right than mere friendship over Tony forgot how exquisitely selfish she was. Sometimes that will safeguard a woman's virtue quite single-handed. And if Tony feared her a trifle, as he undoubtedly did—why else had he lied so valorously and subtly but now?—it was half because he never cared to antagonise the—to him—really amusing set she represented, and half because she was stronger than he, in will. Besides, every man is afraid of every woman. He considers her either sub- or super- or else merely extra-human; she is a superstition with him.

As for Mrs. Shane, Tony belonged to her set—to her. That extraordinary jealousy of the unplaced women, of the gay little unconsidered privateers flying no flag but their own, so often felt by their secure sisters, had her. It has deep roots, that jealousy. The very security of such as Cora Shane, their livelihood, is menaced by those others. Have they not given up the right to their own flag for an assurance of their own menkind, and all that rests on their menkind, the whole foundation of their lives? To have him marry Emily Edgerton would not hurt. It would, on the whole, be an acquisition to their set. But Hope—that would be treachery. In short, he should not.

There was an end to it. Well, she had done what she could.

It was something, also. Going the idle rounds of hotel and club that evening, Tony woke with a start of disgust to the knowledge that he had been looking for Jim Sanderson. Revulsion carried him forthwith to Hope, but there was a little devil of curiosity pricking his brain. For a long time now it had been quieted, drugged by the sweetness of her lips at first, again by the cold fact of Edgerton taking Hope out with his daughter for the world to note. But he was harassed by the knowledge that both Edgerton and Hope were greater individualists than he; he knew, instinctively, that their actions would not square with what impulses would move him to like actions. Muddled, of course, but he could get no nearer a definition of his perplexity. Ned Angell, in like case, being a sentimentalist, would never have perceived the fundamental discrepancy, and so would have been satisfied. But Tony did; and his bewilderment annoyed as much as it hurt him. He fell back, with unconscious irony, on Cora Shane's word: they were outsiders. He had let Hope into his very heart, and she was an outsider still! A horrible miscalculation, somewhere. The changing order of things has laid many traps for such as Tony Yorke; they were better off, selfishly considered, in the days when there were just two kinds of women, their own kind and the others.

So, depressed and tormented, with the images of Edgerton and Ned Angell inimically before his mind's eye, he came to Hope's door. She answered his ring herself. She wore a big white linen apron; she had a smudge of charcoal on her nose and her hair in a braid; and she walked through the mist of his brooding reflections straight to him. They vanished; there remained only a little girl with a smudged nose and

trustful eyes; and he kissed her and gave himself up to the moment. It was impossible to detect the flavour of anything *intrigante* about her; her sweet stupidity—the obverse of a directness which was itself as much a defect as a virtue—her very plainness, made the idea ridiculous. For, on analysis, she was plain; one cannot defend a title to beauty on the strength of a pair of pretty ears, a lovely throat, the sea mist colour of her round sleepy eyes, and a braid of hay-tinted hair, from which two short feathery curls escaped at the nape of her neck.

A tiny dent in her upper lip, a delicate depression at the apex of her collar bone, delighted him; he kissed them, and cuddled her like a pet kitten. She was always grave with him, undemonstrative, like a too thoughtful child. Mostly he loved that reserve, but to-day it exasperated him. It was typical of the thing that troubled him. What was beneath it all? What was she thinking? More, what was she?

"I don't believe you care for me at all," he said at last, half teasingly, half in too much earnest. "You're the coldest creature. You just love being loved."

"No, no—I don't—I'm not——" She struggled visibly for words. The best she could offer was, "I'd—love you just as much, if I could never touch you. If you didn't care for me. If I could just see you sometimes. You don't understand."

To his horrified surprise, he perceived two tears forcing themselves between her lashes. He comforted her, almost alarmed, ready for once to admit to a woman, with no reservation of a smile, that he certainly did not understand. She made no more effort to explain, and he muttered again, half resentful of her admission that his caresses were not essential:

"But you are cold!" and owned to himself that he

had tried in vain to melt her. To turn the subject, he inquired for Mary Dark.

"She's at the office yet," said Hope. "Edgerton is going away to-morrow, I believe, and they are tremendously busy with—~~with~~—with some new scheme or something."

"The Kenatchee Falls business?" asked Tony, eager for news.

"Maybe," said Hope, dissembling badly.

It was clear to him that she knew something of the matter. But it might be from Mary.

"If he'll only take it up," said Tony, and walked about the room nervously. "You know, lady-bird, it means a lot to me—to us. If it goes—we needn't wait any longer. I'll carry you off in a minute." The faint red ran into her face; she nodded. "Have you any idea how he stands? You're pretty good friends, aren't you?" His tone was elaborately casual.

"Yes, in a way," she assented. "But I don't really know anything about his affairs." That was not true, and it distressed her to have to lie to Tony, but she could not betray confidences.

She thought it not quite fair of him to try to pump her, and was still more astounded when she caught his actual intent. He wanted her to help sway Edgerton in his favour! He did not say that exactly; his words were covered with an "if" and other indirections. But that was the meaning. At first she did not know why it hurt, but two reasons crystallised out of the inward refusal that surged up. First, she really knew nothing of the project, so far as its intrinsic merits went. It would be absurd of her to recommend it. Besides, Edgerton certainly knew both his own mind and his own business. She could not imagine him as moved by her pleading. And then, Tony should not ask help of that kind from her; it was not a man's part.

He ought to stand on his own feet. In truth, she was dangerously unsophisticated; no one had ever told her just how much more than kissing went by favour.

"Oh, I couldn't do anything," she murmured. Her choice of phrase conveyed the exact truth.

"Well, I hope we'll get him anyway," said Tony, but somehow he felt as if he had come up against a blank wall, and the mists gathered again. Hope had shut him off from something in her mind. What was it? The door had closed in his face, just as once before. When she had spoken of Jim Sanderson! He wanted to ask her about that, but she had been so exceedingly definite in the first instance. A question would be pointedly meaningless, and he could not think of a plausible excuse for bringing in Jim's name.

"Yes, I hope so," said Hope, and she did, most earnestly. She wanted him to have what he wanted, but she wanted him to get it for himself—and for her. He had said it was for her.

"If it falls through," said Tony, suddenly moody—a rare phase with him—"it might mean waiting for years. Could you give me up, Hope?"

"Not as long as you want me." She too felt that cloud of unanswered queries, things unspoken, between them. "Must I, ever? I could go on working, you know."

"Good Lord, I should hope not," he said, positively startled by her point of view. What on earth would the people he knew think of such a proceeding?

She was wistful when he left: she felt as if she were reaching out to him over some gulf; they strained to each other, and yet in spite of clasped hands and meeting lips the gulf remained. He had not said that nothing should keep them apart.

Mary, arriving late and weary, brought Hope a fare-

well note, and observed that she barely troubled to read it through.

"Tired, dear?" she asked, reading her own sensations into the faint cloud on the girl's brow.

"Oh, no. No," said Hope absently. "I'll write to-morrow." She was talking to herself. "Mary, is he going to buy in the Kenatchee Company?"

Mary would have answered the question to no one else, but she knew Edgerton told Hope all the girl cared to hear, perhaps as a relief after keeping his own counsel with everybody else.

"I don't really know," she said. "He has an ace up his sleeve. He's playing them; but I don't know why. I asked him to-day, and he only laughed. He knows what he's doing, I'm sure; but I don't. These alleged business men here are babes in arms compared to him. None of them ever really made any money, as he has. They simply sat still till it grew up round them. He has the gift. It is a gift—like a strawberry mark!" She laughed. "Hope, I'm tired of this town."

"But you told me——" Hope began.

"I was raving," said Mary. "Or I lied. The fact is, my child, I'm making too much money. I wax fat and kick, like Jeshurun. To have money and no place to spend it is almost as bad as having none and every place to spend it. I am tired of this particular treadmill. I'm tired of setting springes for woodcocks. Every time I write a new rhapsody to lure some unsuspecting farmer into our toils I have to go out and tell the absolute truth to some of my best friends to square my conscience. As a result, Mrs. Manners won't speak to me, and Cora Shane has been telling everyone that Johnny Walters must have thrown me over and soured my disposition. Dear Johnny heard it himself, and came to me with tears

in his eyes to ask if it was true." She laughed again. "And I'm afraid of going to Eleanor Travers's dance for fear I may ask her about her brother. You know he has low tastes, wouldn't go to college, and drives a truck for a living. He is the family skeleton; he weighs two hundred pounds. I always liked him, but half the town doesn't know there is such a person."

"I didn't know she was giving a dance," said Hope, still absently. "I wonder if Kenatchee Falls wouldn't be a good investment?"

To which Mary answered lucidly:

"Ah, I think I shall have to settle with Cora Shane." She went to the telephone, called up Miss Travers and asked herself to tea the next day.

Shortly after, Hope received a card to the dance. She looked at it listlessly, as she had at Edgerton's letter—which was yet unanswered—and said at last that she did not want to go anywhere.

"But you ought to," said Mary.

She could not give a reason when Hope asked why.

Tony stayed away for two weeks.

CHAPTER XII

HE had not meant to. He did not want to. He wanted to see her; he craved the delight, the full, tender tide of emotion—half-sensuous, half-spiritual—that she stirred in him. But there was the cloud between them; when he would go to her, he seemed to be walking into it. He could not get away from it, even in thought, without dismissing her with it; unconsciously, he found himself wishing to put her image from his mind. Then he sought for a way through, and harked back to Jim Sanderson as the only possible solution. Edgerton was a solution, but not in that sense possible. Sanderson was away.

Other worries crowded on him; his financial affairs were by no means in order; there were numberless petty irritations about money, the more exasperating because release from them was in plain sight but remained just out of reach. And yet in this case the association of ideas which kept him away from Hope failed to operate in wonted sequence. He should have begun to dislike Edgerton, as being connected with both his anxieties, but he did not. It would have been counter to both his training and his instincts. Edgerton was still Success, and he still respected Success, and liked those who had achieved it. So he honestly liked Edgerton, none the less because his one or two letters to him, touching the Kenatchee Falls business, went unanswered.

But, since nothing lasts, gradually he began to lose that sense of separation from Hope, the more because a small sum of money came in opportunely and eased

the other pressure. And when at last he turned into her front gate, he walked joyfully.

She came to his arms, like a nesting bird, too happy to speak.

They never were fluent with each other since the definite engagement. They had exhausted the generalities available for first acquaintance. The significance of the fact escaped them. It was not jealousy, but the mere search for a topic led her to ask him if he had been busy.

"Very busy," he said. "And then I thought I'd square a few other accounts and I paid all my old calls. I thought I'd surely meet you, somewhere." His own words flew back and stung him. Why did he not meet her, somewhere?

"I've only been lazy," she said bravely. Though she would cloister herself, wear the willow for him in solitude, she would never, never have told him so, nor even let him guess it. "Mary tried to drag me to the Travers dance. I don't think I want people, just now."

"Most of 'em are plain nuisances," he said, smiling, "but I need some of them in my business. Got to be nice to them."

"I don't see how you do it," she said, in honest wonder. "Have you got any further with Ken-atchee?"

His mention of business had suggested that, but immediately she was sorry, because he had told her that it meant their marriage. She had almost a horror of seeming to wish that it might be hastened. She wanted him not only to approve the plans, but to originate them. She wanted to be the Princess of the Glass Tower, and he should climb eagerly to the very top for her.

"No," he answered, with sudden gloom. "Can't do anything till Edgerton comes back. I hope he hurries."

"I don't think he will be, for several months," she said, qualifying it only with, "I am not sure, though."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Why, no, not exactly. But he is going to New York first, maybe to Europe."

"Did he write to you?" was what he wanted to ask. It was as if he could hardly see her now for the returning cloud. But he said nothing. There *was* something at the back of all this. Why, if she were so close to Edgerton, could she not help him, Tony? It would be only natural, unless—unless she could ask nothing for a rival, and hope for success.

He was cold. His pride as a man and a lover was stabbed; also, he suffered more simply. Then she leaned to him hesitantly, and he kissed her, and found it hurt; something base had crept into his delight. He did not believe her absolutely. Thereafter he went looking for flaws, for discrepancies. Still making conversation, he asked:

"Is Miss Edgerton coming back with him?"

"Yes, I think so. Mary had a letter from her; she wants to come back. She's going to Europe too."

Was that it? His relief was immeasurable. Emily had written.

But that answer was only a question too. He saw that after he had left her.

To his own creeping shame, he found himself perpetually setting traps for her. And he knew he was waiting for Jim Sanderson to come back. He hated it all so much that sometimes he hated himself. And sometimes he almost hated Hope. He did not know whether his shame was for doubting her or for ever having believed her.

It was not comfortable. And he hated discomfort above everything.

Once in a while he forgot by drinking more than enough. There were still moments when Hope herself could banish it from his mind. And increasingly he found himself at ease with Cora Shane. The absurd reason underlying that fact was that to Cora Shane he had denied Hope. So with her the whole entanglement did not exist. Hope did not exist. Mrs. Shane, needing no more information than she got from other sources, never spoke of her.

The long room, with the flowers on the grand piano and Cora welcoming him from the depths of her basket chair, was Tom Tiddler's Ground. It took him out of himself. He was there very often.

So of course he saw Hope less. Yet he was more loving than before when he did see her. He was trying to shut out the cloud from between them. They were both aware of it. Only Hope did not know what it was.

She moped, and tried to hide it. Ned Angell became a nuisance to her. He covertly accused her of something near the truth. Her secret unhappiness had for him a morbid fascination. He was sentimental, in a word. He wanted to sympathise. She could have slain him for it cheerfully; figuratively, she threw him out of the house of her soul, neck and crop. And then he hovered. It was awful; only Mary's pungent cynicism and sharp, unsparing laughter saved her from running amuck in some way.

Mary knew. But her every word and action insisted that she did not know. Hope was grateful.

She hardly saw anyone but those two and occasionally Allen Kirby. She would not go anywhere, except for aimless, prowling walks in the dusk. A weight of uncertainty clung to her. What was the

matter? She repeated the question to herself until it became meaningless with iteration, like the mutterings of a fever patient. And then one day something about it made her laugh, some burlesque touch of Mary's, so sly it could not be returned nor acknowledged. That cleared her brain. There was nothing the matter, except that she was a fool, and probably Tony was still worried over his business affairs.

Having settled on that explanation, she was peaceful again. But she was not again so happy; she hoped, where before she felt she had won to the end.

She should have been haughty, and exacting. So she would have fared much better. Tony thought her patient with him when her patience was for events; in him she believed still, absolutely. He, taking the world's valuation of the world, took love's outward valuation of love. But Hope asked only the crumbs from the table; she did not think anyone—except Tony, perhaps—splendid enough to command the whole feast. This is no more than a rather idealistic folly, to make of it a feast rather than daily fare—but how should she know? Tony actually thought her a little Griselda, a Lætitia Dale. Always, of course, she would be there. So he need never hasten to her. He needed a spur. What jealousy he had felt was a thorn instead. Yet he loved her. We must all love as best we can.

Mary knew at last that she had failed. There was only luck to hope for now. Hope shrunk with obvious distress from any questions. Quite shamelessly, Mary broke her word and told Lisbeth.

"But why won't she announce it?" asked Mrs. Patten, with simple bewilderment.

"Because it's hers," said Mary thoughtfully. "Primitive instinct. As far as decency goes, we know she's perfectly right. But organised society doesn't

really care a fig for decency; it's bent only on self-protection. Just reverse that, and you have Hope. Now watch the irresistible force strike her, head on."

"It will," said Mrs. Patten with regretful conviction. "Why, Tony himself is a cause of gossip now. Can't you fancy him learning that? He'll be in a terrible predicament—won't know whether to believe it or not! I mean, to believe if there's any truth in it. Mary, can't you ask her to do it for you? She lives with you; you can't afford to have——"

"Oh, bunk," said Mary inelegantly. "As long as my uncle is Minister of Mines at Ottawa I can afford seven scandals a week. If the Government doesn't fall before the next Birthday he'll have a nice shiny knighthood, and I can afford a dozen. I do like the British system we've taken over with the Birthday Honours of being inalienably respectable once established, unless we get into the newspapers. Why, even the fact that uncle can't get on with me for half an hour doesn't make any difference. No, your suggestion is really awfully good—only it won't work. If I told her exactly what you've said, she'd feel worse than if she were in the stocks before the whole town. If I didn't, she would not understand, but would probably insist on leaving me in genuine sorrow at having done whatever-it-might-be that injured me. Why, she wouldn't even hate me! I can only think of putting an announcement in the paper, and then virtually daring Tony to deny it. It would be amusing—but no, I don't dare."

"Then take her out more."

"Lisbeth, I haven't the heart for that either. Wait till she's five years older, over with all this, and has grown a skin. I *did* take her out last week, to the Lockwoods'. Mrs. Lockwood was just plain catty curious to see the girl she'd heard so much about. But

I took her. It was funny. After the weather, some one said something about books. Hope brightened, her eye positively gleamed with intelligence. She made a remark—I forget what—and Mrs. Lockwood said that, for her part, she thought Marie Corelli wrote beautifully. Hope sat with her mouth open for a full minute; simply floored. She was squirming inside, checkmated. You know, she really had expected conversation. Well, you've spoiled her. I suppose Mr. Lockwood himself must have noticed her hunted look. He brought her the last collection of Christy stiffs to look over, a tribute to her artistic endowments! Then she sat turning the leaves in a kind of trance for awhile, and the rest of us talked scandal, over her head, until Dr. Wilton brought in Viola Marsten's name. Hope said she thought Viola exceedingly pretty. The sound of her voice created a mild sensation, she'd been sitting so mumchance. And Dr. Wilton—you know what a gossiping cad he is—started to tell a story about Viola. Of course you've heard it. I was afraid she'd get up and go out. She told me afterward that she'd never dreamed a man would tear a girl's name to pieces like that, for sheer vicious pleasure. Well, of course a *man* wouldn't. She was unhappy; she was lost. I took her away. 'She can't talk at all, can she?' Mrs. Lockwood said afterward. 'I should think Tony would be bored to death.' Now, what could I do?"

Mrs. Patten did not know. For herself she could do nothing for Hope; she was in mourning that year for the death of her father.

They owned defeat by yielding to helpless belated laughter at the scene Mary had recreated.

"Yes, let's talk about something else, and leave Hope to the ultimate mercy of Heaven," said Mary resignedly.

"Well," sighed Mrs. Patten, "if I knew what to do I'd do it. Ned keeps telling me about it, you know——"

"Oh, Ned——" Mary bit the rest of the sentence off and swallowed it.

"He never had a chance," said Mrs. Patten, almost inaudibly, her eyes over-brilliant. "His father——"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Mary hastily, softened. "Those idiotic Roman fathers. They break their boys, and then virtuously chuck them on the dust-heap——out here. It's sweeping smoking flax into the fire-place. What's a man to hold to here? Lisbeth, do let's be cheerful, talk about a nice murder, or something."

So they went out in the kitchen to get tea, and later Mary walked home, not so much for the exercise as because there were no street-cars. Spring was late and stormy; she got herself in a pleasant glow, tempered with apprehensions of a frostbitten ear, struggling against a snow-laden Norther that seemed utterly unaware this was April.

"A perfectly irrational climate," she commented to herself. "Perhaps it accounts for Hope." And she jerked open the storm door, plunged into the house headlong, and cannoned off Ned Angell, who was just going out.

"Ned," she said acidly, "you have a positive genius for being in the wrong place," and left him, before he could find breath to answer, to put whatever construction he chose on the sentence.

Hope was at her drawing-board. It was quite evident she had been working without regard for Ned's presence. She looked up with a half-frown, as if she feared he might have come back.

"Oh, Mary," she said, in the level tone that denotes a preoccupied mind, "*what* was the fourth Moon Baby

doing in the story we did yesterday? I forget, and I can't find your copy. Lookyhere, woman, he goes up in this corner; I've left room for him."

"I forget, too," said Mary, "but here's the story." She produced it from beneath the lamp. "Oh, the darlings! I love their ducktail curls and funny little sad faces. Hope, why don't you use them some way? Make a nursery dado—say?"

"Well, dear," said Hope, "we haven't any nursery. And would anyone in this town know what to do with a dado?"

"No," agreed Mary, dropping the suggestion. "They'd probably think it was something out of a menagerie. Had company, didn't you?" There were two empty tea-cups.

"Only Ned."

"Expecting anyone else to-night?"

Hope shook her head. Her eyes remained fixed on her drawing.

CHAPTER XIII

THE storm raged itself out; before the snow had time to compose to the outline of the earth a chinook shrieked down from over the heads of the mountains, and the white coverlet shrank and dissolved as if a hot iron were being passed over it. When the wind quieted after a day or two nothing of the snow remained. Hope walked dry-shod over the unpaved crossings in the part of the town where she and Mary lived, directing her course toward a grateful spot of green in the heart of the town, the gardens surrounding the railway station. There were no flowers yet, but the dwarf cedars were sharply fresh. There was even a faint flush of green on the close sward, for the grass grew like magic when a warm spell encouraged it while any moisture remained. Hope had a letter in her hand; she wanted to catch the mail train from the South. She paced up and down idly, through the small expectant crowd, consciously enjoying the thin sunshine which the boarded platform seemed to conserve. There was no one she knew in sight. By and by the express swept in with a clanging rush. She went forward toward the mail car.

A girl in a brown tailor-made, with a pheasant wing on her smart hat, was first foot out of the Pullman to the porter's stool. Behind her pressed a tall man in grey—Edgerton. Emily, revealing herself by tossing back a travelling veil, handed him her dressing-case.

"Hold it, daddy," she adjured him. "I have eleven-ty-three telegrams to send; wait for me."

She went into the station, and he stood over their luggage, looking for a porter. Emily had a passion for telegraphing to her girl friends.

Through the confused crowd, Hope came by and would have passed him unseeing. He called her name, twice; several people turned to stare before she would notice.

But when she did, her welcome was heartening.

"Why didn't you say you were coming?" she reproached him. "I'm sure Mary didn't know."

"You mean," he said, for he was capable of mischief, "Miss Dark is playing hooky from the office. I came on purpose to catch her at it. Why didn't you write, little girl?"

"I—I meant to," she stammered.

He looked at her closely.

"You look tired," he said.

"It was a long winter." She sighed. "Did you have a good time in New York?"

"Great—I wish you'd been there. Emily spent two hundred dollars a day."

She laughed; that was so like him.

"You've got some beautiful new clothes yourself," she said, becoming properly serious.

"The very latest thing," he told her. "This waistcoat, now——" But she had begun to laugh again. "I brought you something," he said. "Am I to see you, this trip?"

The naïve bribe also amused her.

"Why not? Do you stay long? I thought Emily was coming with you again."

"She's here," he said, and Hope, turning, was just in time to see her coming through the big swing doors. "How pretty—and well dressed," she thought. Emily seemed to have grown, she had perceptibly gained in finish. Tony Yorke was with her! Edger-

ton was still explaining, "I don't know how long; I have some business to wind up."

"At Kenatchee?" asked Hope half teasingly.

"You and Miss Dark," said Edgerton confidentially, "for two clever women, are slow, darned slow. There are several other people would like to know what you'd like to know; I want to see if you won't get next before them. And here's one of the others," he nodded toward Tony, hardly yet within ear-shot. He chuckled to himself. "Emmy," he said, "trust you to spear a young man within five minutes after you get off the train in a strange town. Hello, Yorke." They shook hands; Tony's manner was easy and unconstrained. Emily was a trifle rosy, and seemed to remember Hope with difficulty.

"But of course, I do," she protested, "only your name's so odd; pretty, too, I think." Yes, Emily was assimilating her world more and more. "Tell me, do you still see Miss Dark? I liked her so much; and I met some of her people lately. Tell her I am in town; perhaps she will be nice and come to see me. Daddy, have you got a porter yet?"

He had; they strolled away together, Emily and Tony walking on ahead, carrying on a gay but indistinguishable conversation of their own. At the end of the long platform Hope stopped.

"End of the line," she announced. "I have an appointment; yes, with Mary. I shall warn her. Good-bye, Miss Edgerton," she called.

Emily turned.

"Oh, wait," she cried. "I wanted to say—will you not come with Miss Dark? Do, please."

Hope promised; and, as Edgerton was again asking her if he might see her, she smiled at him, so the assent covered both questions. But he detained her yet a moment.

"I say," he asked, for Emily and Tony were again walking on, "what sort of chap is that Yorke? You know him well, don't you?"

Why did he ask?

"Yes, rather," she said. Once she had so answered Tony's question about Edgerton. "He's very—agreeable," she added calmly.

"Emmy seems to like him," Edgerton explained. "Got his picture—oh, well, she has a regular gallery!"

Hope repeated her good-byes. She still felt singularly calm, but dull—heavy. She forgot about Mary, until she had walked nearly home. Then she ran all the way downtown again, and forgot what it was had caused her to forget.

But Tony, although he was having a very pleasant moment with Emily Edgerton, did not forget that he had heard Edgerton call Hope by her name, seen her turn and hold out both her hands, there on the station platform. He had been in the crowd there but a moment before he had gone into the station and met Emily. He thought Hope had come to meet Edgerton. That he was there himself, innocently; that everyone walked by the station every day, he forgot. That was why he had turned away without speaking.

Of course Emily's presence put a slightly different face on that. And since she had brought him into the party, not unwillingly, he thought perhaps it was an excellent opportunity to sound Edgerton. He walked with them to the hotel, and Emily was kind. Tony had had enough experience to know when a pretty girl was delicately smoothing the way for an advance for him; it did not require undue conceit on his part to understand Emily's attitude. She was gracious, and just flatteringly shy; she reverted to incidents of her former visit as if she had forgotten no phase of it. And he lost nothing of her added social stature; even

her costume, a year ahead of the *modes* there, was not wasted on him. She had grown into such a girl as he had once led cotillions with at home. Such a girl, he might have added, as he had once provisioned as a wife. The second generation had come into its own.

In the lobby she left the two men to go to her room, and they gravitated insensibly towards the bar. Edgerton was quite encouragingly cordial. He meant, in fact, to have a little of his own kind of fun with Tony, knowing quite well of what the young man was thinking. Within the week a meeting of the Kenatchee Falls Company's directors was to be held, and Edgerton had fully made up his mind to come finally to terms with them; his own terms, but not too ungenerous. But he had not the least intention of giving any clue of those terms to Tony, and was jocular when he deliberately brought up the subject.

"Oh, well," said Tony, "of course, if you can't see your way to going into it, we'll have to turn our guns in another direction. I suppose you know Sir Wardell Bromley looked it over a few weeks ago, but we held him off to give you first call."

Edgerton chuckled; he did know. He knew quite well, also, by cable from London, that Sir Wardell's "pool," alarmed by a recent slump in Canadian securities brought about by a big bank failure, had definitely withdrawn. The echoes of that bank crash were still heard; capital had never been so shy.

"Oh, yes. Yes," he said. "Well, I've been waiting on my engineer's report." He had had it six months before. "Yorke, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, trying to sell me a gold brick like that." Tony's jaw dropped; then he looked sincerely angry, and was about to speak. "Oh, come on, can't you take a joke?" Edgerton forestalled him good-naturedly. "Do you

want me to own up I simply can't raise the coin just now? Hard times, hard times." He shook his head, and Tony missed the twinkle in his eyes. "I guess I'll have to pass the buck to your Britisher. Too bad. Say, come around and lunch some day this week. Didn't I hear Emmy asking you? Glad to see you. Guess I'll go up and put on a clean collar." He went.

Perhaps if he had known how much it meant to Tony, everything, in short, he would not have extracted quite the same flavour of fun from his deception. But then, business was business; he had to drive a bargain, and he knew the psychological value of suspense. What he wanted was simply a clear majority in the company, and he meant to have that or nothing. He wanted to show the others very plainly that "nothing" from him meant exactly nothing from any source; and he thought Tony would do it for him. They would go to that meeting without hope, now, and would snatch at whatever he offered.

Without hope was exactly Tony's own feeling. And he had not the small consolation he had counted on when he came West, of losing nothing; for to lose even the hope of a very material good is to lose a great deal. It was checkmate. Where could he turn? He pondered despondently over a lone glass of Scotch and soda, turning with a sensation of distinct annoyance when someone slapped him heartily on the shoulder.

It was a day for meetings, evidently. The newcomer was Jim Sanderson, exuding good-fellowship at every pore, and loud in his rejoicings at being back, after a long sojourn in the Northern wilderness investigating copper prospects.

"How's everyone?" he inquired genially. "Anyone dead, married, eloped? Any new girls? Spin it out."

Jim Sanderson, *inter alia*, was a male gossip; a creature not so rare as may be innocently supposed. He and Dr. Wilton were cronies; he had plenty of men friends of a casual sort besides, but to one who knew either of those two that simple fact sufficed to express him. It was not difficult to get him to talk; a harder proposition would have been to silence him. Tony sometimes tried uneasily to clear himself of having brought in Hope's name, there, in that glittering and profanely masculine room with the long mahogany counter and huge mirror, when he thought of the matter afterwards; but the best he could do for himself was to be not quite sure. What Sanderson said, in detail, were hardly worth setting down, but the import was sufficiently black; and he was extraordinarily explicit with names, dates, and places. Poor Evan Hardy, had he been there, would have acted the man's part which Tony declined. By a miracle, there was no one else in the bar at the moment, and they lowered their voices, Jim with that air of forbidden enjoyment always noticeable when such confidences are being exchanged, whether over Pekoe or Scotch. So he collected payment for that blow on the cheek. But to do him justice, he would have told the tale quite gladly with no such incentive.

After that, having washed his hands in such exceedingly muddy water, Tony felt clean to go to Emily Edgerton, who had promised to meet him in the tea-room in an hour. He was unusually gay. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow——" no, not to-morrow, to-day, everything had tumbled about his ears. His hope of a fortune was gone, and Hope was faithless. Why, she had been faithless before he ever met her! Deep down, some bewildered protest struggled to be heard in him; it was not possible that any girl, nay, not the most clever woman, could have seemed,

and only seemed, to be what she was. But he refused to hear it. And this was most characteristic of him: that he felt most like a gambler who has lost his last stake, rather than a man deceived. Hope went with the rest. It did not make matters pleasanter, but then it was only a part of the whole.

Emily came down the stairs, hard on the heels of that lingering thought of Hope; the sight of her crowded the other from his mind. Heavens, the girl was more than pretty; she was a beauty! Her white serge gown—she had thought it worth while to change, then—moulded itself to her long, vigorous lines with classic effect, and her shoes, her gleaming white silk hose, the lacy ruffles that cascaded from the base of her firm throat, her large white hat, were again of the top of the *mode*. He had never appreciated her before. She was charming—and willing to be charmed. Over the wicker tea-table in the farthest corner of the lounge they progressed, in half an hour, a very long way. When he left her, he was not sure but there might yet be a turn of the wheel before the ball fell.

But for Emily, he might not have had the courage or desire to go to Hope as he did, early that evening. He would have let her eat her heart out in slow suspense, because he hated the unpleasantness inseparable from what he meant to do. But she would see Emily and her father probably soon, and while he never expected her to tell anything to anyone, he desired there should be nothing to tell. It might sometimes be more amusing to be on with the new love before he was off with the old, but it was not always safe, and his margin was narrow already. So he went.

She saw his depression instantly. And he did not offer to kiss her, but sat down, looked at the floor, and seemed to wait for some second sight on her part

to read his purpose. But all she could do was to ask, in a hurt, frightened, low voice:

"What is the matter, Tony?"

"Everything," he said, trying to hasten the end. "It's all off. I—Hope, I've played out my string. I can't hold you to marrying a man without a cent in the world, and mighty uncertain prospects. I saw Edgerton; he's not going to take us up. So the best thing for you is for me to clear out."

She sat frozen. If he had tried to hold her, even shown her that the renunciation of her meant more to him than the other loss; if he had even asked her to wait for him. There was a weight like lead in her bosom, and beneath that tears, which would not come because the weight withheld them. Was this the man who would over-ride destiny for her? He was yielding without a blow being struck.

"If I'm a burden to you," she said at last in a dull voice, "of course I can't—can't——" Indeed, she could not do anything, not even finish whatever it was she meant to say. "You know you're free," she articulated finally. "You must do what you think best." Now for the first time she longed achingly for him to offer her one caress. Her stillness deceived him into thinking her simply indifferent. With that fine unreason common to love, even love denied, he was wounded by her attitude.

He had come to her honestly meaning to spare her as much as possible; he did not really like to see anyone suffer. But neither did he like to do all the suffering himself; and then, too, he wanted horribly to justify himself.

"Oh, well," he said, "you never cared much. You didn't even want to help."

"I couldn't," she said in bewildered protest.

He eyed her narrowly.

"Anyway, you'll forget me—as you did the others."

"The others?" She looked at him in utter perplexity. "What others?"

"Sanderson told me," he said, with rising heat. "And you said you didn't know him. I believed you, Hope!"

Slowly it reached her confused mind, which was stupefied by the shock.

"I didn't want to know him," she answered, after a pause, and got to her feet, her eyes hard and bright. "He's a—an unspeakable cad. I can't bear to speak of him. You—you talked me over with *him*? Ah!" Her old disgust of the man choked her. She presented her back to Tony, and walked to the window.

"No, I didn't," he denied untruthfully. "And haven't I seen for myself—other things?"

She made no answer. Hope was by no means of an hysterical nature; but now she was fighting, to the last of her strength, to keep from losing self-control while he was near. She had been under a long, unacknowledged strain, and if she even tried to speak she knew not what frantic foolishness she might commit herself to. She wanted to fight for her happiness, to plead for it even; but could not. She wondered wildly what his last words meant, and to ask him was out of her power. And again, she did not want to know. Everything he had said had been so unbearable; to hear any more was beyond her. The others! Thus to cheapen her feeling for him, why, he was committing sacrilege. She had never thought so basely of him.

Unconsciously she pulled a leaf from the geranium, looking at it closely but without seeing it at all, still waiting until she could find some words that might be adequate, and not wild. She heard him cross the room—to the door. And he supplied the needed word.

"Good-bye—dear," he said, his voice singularly gentle. At the end remorse had overtaken him. And also, even at the very last, she remained a puzzle to him. She had explained nothing.

"Good-bye," she said, without turning. She heard the door close. She could not move, to go after him, where her heart went, and recapture her happiness, and her trust.

Mary found her, lying on the couch with the room darkened and a towel bound about her forehead and eyes, quite two hours later. She was sick with weeping, her face swollen and marred with tears, but still.

"It's all over, Mary, and the dead are counted," she said, sitting up as the light came on. "P-please don't tell me how beautiful I look." There was a catch in her voice, which was husky and toneless.

"You and Tony?" said Mary, shocked beyond words by the very thing she had always expected.

"Y-yes," said Hope. "I'll tell you—some time. Let's talk about something else. Something funny."

And Mary did. But that night she heard Hope sobbing in her sleep.

CHAPTER XIV

MARY knew Edgerton had something on his mind; he watched her furtively over his shoulder, and handled the papers on his desk in an aimless manner utterly foreign to him. But when he finally unburdened himself, she was utterly surprised.

"I don't know much about women," he began. "At least," his brow contracted, "my wife says I don't."

There was a hidden meaning in that reference, for Edgerton's heart was sore and his pride raw from his wife's gentle ministrations. Her parting words to him had been inexpressibly cruel. He had gone to her, in great loneliness of soul, after his return from New York, and begged for a complete reconciliation. Perhaps he wanted to fortify himself against the imminent meeting with Hope; but chiefly, his divided home had always been a secret grief to him, and this was not the first effort he had made to close the breach.

It was her habit to put him in the wrong; to make him lose his temper ineffectually; always he found himself unable to say what he would; but even a stupider woman than she must have understood his blundering advances, and realised what he was offering her. But the plain truth was she did not want it because she would not have known what to do with it. This time, when he had pleaded for a little love, like a beggar for a crust, she had told him—the remembrance of it would smart for years—that no woman could love him, except for his money. She had not spared to hint that even Emily's affection was held at a price. He did

not realise it yet, but in fact she had at last broken his bonds by overstraining them; her hold on him was gone. He would never again ask her for anything. More, he would never again desire aught from her.

"Oh, well, who does know anything about women?" said Mary cheerfully. "They're exactly like men—all different."

"Are they?" He did not seem certain in his mind. "It's my girl I'm thinking of. You know, I want her to be happy. I want her to have everything she wants, if it's good for her."

"What does she want?" said Mary briskly, but touched by his turning to her in his perplexity.

"She's got a fancy for that young man—Yorke," said Edgerton.

Mary positively gaped at him.

"Do you mean that he has proposed to her?"

"Well, in a way. Emmy and I have always been chums, you know. She just hinted that he had hinted that she was the only girl in the world—oh, she just had to tell someone, you see, and I was the only one handy." He dissembled his pride that she had brought her unfolding little heart to him, her father. "She always does tell me, when any young sprig begins making up. She's had a dozen. But she says she *likes* this one."

"But what do you want me to do?" asked Mary, absently tearing up an advertising layout she had been working at all the morning.

"Tell me if he's good enough," said Edgerton. "You know him, and I'd back your judgment. I don't know anything about him, and I haven't time to find out, if I want to act."

"He's not good enough," said Mary viciously. Edgerton looked up sharply.

"Why not?"

"Because," she spoke carefully, her dark eyes narrowing like a cat's, "he jilted another girl within the week. And he hasn't a cent in the world. Neither had she. Put two and two together." Then she feared she might have struck him, instead of Tóny, through his pride in his daughter. "But certainly," she said, "he is attracted by Emily—who wouldn't be? But I do know him, and he's not good enough, not for your daughter, anyway. Why," she added, with some sincerity, "Emily can pick and choose; she can have the best. She'd be throwing herself away. He's a lame duck," she finished Tony off with one of Edgerton's own phrases.

"All right," said Edgerton. "Thank you, awfully, Mary—I beg your pardon, I mean Miss Dark. I've heard you called by your first name so often. I wonder if you couldn't see Emily, and maybe show her the same thing? She thinks you're so clever, you know; and it takes a girl to talk to another girl."

"I'll try," said Mary rather doubtfully.

She telephoned to Emily for an appointment, and Emily insisted on lunching her, so it promised well. Edgerton fell to pondering again, and as the result of an hour's cogitation, scribbled a note, handed it to Mary hastily, and reached for his hat. At the door he turned.

"Who was the other girl?" he asked.

"Oh, now! That wouldn't be fair," said Mary. He nodded assent, and went out. The note was for Hope.

If Mary had thought twice, she might not have given Hope her news with the note. But she thought a desperate case required desperate remedies, and the girl was sick of a spiritual fever, sunk in a dreadful lassitude. Her eyes were ringed with black, her face looked pinched and ghostly, and she walked unseeing, like a somnambulist.

She twisted the note around her fingers while she listened, and seemed at first to make no sense of what Mary said. Then her head went up stiffly, with a gesture of a sort of direful pride.

"Are they engaged, then?" she only asked, at last.

"No," said Mary, telling nothing of her own part in the matter. "Her father will not have it; and I know he will prevent it. I am certain of that."

Hope stood up, her hand pressed to her side.

"Mary," she said piteously, "was he like that all the time—all the time? Was I really such a fool? Why didn't I see it?"

Mary knew she must be calm.

"Schopenhauer explains that much better than I can," she said lightly. "And we're all fools, all the time. Poor Tony is what he is; he can't help it. Circumstances cornered him, that's all. But he has all the qualities that attract; I believe I could love him myself, with my eyes wide open, if everything conspired against me. If you were ten years older, you'd have managed circumstances, and been happy. Tony needs a woman of the world, not a gosling like you."

"What should I have done?" she asked again.

"What did I do? He didn't believe Jim Sanderson; he only wanted an excuse."

"Well, child, don't we always believe our own excuses?" said Mary sensibly. And, thinking that later the lesson might be of use, she added, "Besides, you have behaved outrageously; you certainly have." Hope listened, with close and rather painful attention, while Mary explained very succinctly and as impartially as a mirror just what she had done and left undone. Mary could see the girl did not quite understand—but in time she would. She ended, "But that won't matter, if you really want him. Of course he's

not worth breaking your heart over, but you can have him yet if you like."

"But I don't! I don't! I want what I thought he was. It's just because he isn't worth—Mary, I hate this place; it chokes me. I hate everybody in it. I suppose I was—an—an idiot—but I never hurt anyone. Why——? I want to get away from here."

It did choke her. There flooded over her like a wave the feeling she had known the night she met Tony at the dance supper. It was all muddy, evil, hateful; and she felt herself sunk in it unaware, until she could scarcely breathe.

Then she found Edgerton's note in her hand, and began to laugh.

"Was Tony thinking of him?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Oh, probably," said Mary. "Don't bother about it any more now. Will you come and see Emily tomorrow with me?"

"Oh, yes," said Hope. "I'll play the game now. That's what I should have done before, isn't it?"

Then her self-control gave way, and she wept again. And then she laughed, and wrote an answer to Edgerton. Mary went to bed exhausted from sheer sympathy, but Hope sat up half the night reading. Once Mrs. Hamilton tapped at the door to inquire unobtrusively if the light meant someone ill, and Mary heard Hope joking with her for a moment. When she woke again it was day, and Hope lay beside her in a sleep as deep as death, white and quiet.

Edgerton only came to the corner with the motor, but Hope heard the muffled down engine as he stopped, and ran to meet him with a sensation of escape. Mary was away for the evening, but Mrs. Hamilton, according to custom, was at home. Little Bobby galloped after her unsteadily; she turned on him with mock

ferocity, and he fled, shrieking with delicious fright. Then she shut the door on him and came up to Edgerton, out of breath. There was something of that air of breathlessness, of going too quickly to think, about her all the evening. They went straight away from the town, very fast at first; and in the close air of a still and clouded night they seemed to skim the earth, to lose identity with reality. It was thickly dark. When Edgerton slowed down, miles away, they seemed adrift in space, detached from the living world.

"Why are you driving?" asked Hope. "Where is Allen? I tried to find him on the telephone to-day."

"Did you?" said Edgerton, in a tone of dry humour. "I thought so. That's why I sent him away. You'll never see him again, little girl. Unless you order me to bring him back for you. Can't I fill his place?"

"Oh, just as well," she said lightly. "You did know we used to steal your old car, then?"

"I did," said Edgerton. "And it's a brand new car."

"Were you jealous of him?" She asked it idly.

"Horribly," said Edgerton.

Astounded, she detected the note of truth in his voice. He had been jealous, too! And he had done what one should do: he had calmly removed the cause. She admired him, in a queerly impersonal way. He commanded circumstances. Once she had thought Tony capable of that!

"Oh, never mind," she said. "I just wanted someone to worry. Con, I must do something. I'm going away. This town is full of emptiness."

"I'm going away, too," he remarked. "Want to come along?"

Now he was patently jesting, and she sent his head spinning with her answer:

"Yes. Please take me."

"My God," he said, forgetting the wheel a moment. "Don't say things like that, dear."

"Oh, well," she sighed; "of course you don't need me. You have everything, or can get it."

"You mean I'm rich," he returned. He felt the necessity of seeing himself truly for once, and to do that he must see through the eyes of another. The barrenness of inanimate possessions was plain to him; his wife's taunt had stripped him bare in his own sight, and when he had sent Allen Kirby away he had known that as one man to another he feared the contest. "When I die," he said grimly, "I'd like to have all my money brought to me, in paper, piled up—and I'll set a match to it. Half my life's gone into the making of it. I don't see why anyone else should have it."

His secret bitterness welled up; he spoke as an injured man, cheated, defrauded, by a world that set up such false values before ignorant youth. The ring of his tone was unmistakable. Hope leaned forward and peered at him through the dark.

"Then," she said slowly, "after all, you're really no cleverer than I. You didn't get anything out of it all, either. And I was envying you!"

Well, it was true. He had sold twenty years of his life for money, and now it came to him with a veritable shock of horror that he could not repurchase those busy, empty years for ten thousand times the sum he had sold them for. Probably never again would he have this vision, reach the bottom of the cup he had filled for himself.

"No," he said, "I didn't—— What are you talking about? You've got it all yet."

"Mine," she said, "was another kind of soap-bubble."

"You mean——" His mind was not quick, but it

had a sure reach. Slowly, now, he pieced together many little things. "Were you the girl? The girl Tony Yorke threw over?" He had not meant to put it quite so brutally.

She grew hot, and visibly shrank into her cocoon-like wrappings, but the necessity for honesty overcame her also.

"How did you guess? Yes, it was me."

Edgerton muttered something indistinguishable and angry.

"Why?" he asked heavily.

"Oh, why not?" she retorted, and tried to turn it into a sorry joke. "Weren't you frightened yourself a minute ago?"

"I?" He reached round and drew her chin up clumsily. Her cheek was wet to touch. "You didn't mean it—— It wouldn't be fair—and it isn't fair of you. Would you?"

"Oh, yes, I would," she said calmly, but remembrance sent her mind off at a tangent. "No, there's your wife; of course, it would be a rotten thing to do."

"My wife!" He laughed. "You needn't worry about her; she never wants to see me again, and I mean to oblige her. If that's all—— Oh, don't say any more. I give in; you know you can twist me around your finger; but don't; not to-night. I'd go through hell for you. You didn't mean it, did you?"

"I did," she reiterated wildly, for they were both bewildered and lost in the Land of Last Things, and could not stop telling the truth. She tried to qualify and explain, but his mood had caught fire now.

"All right," he said. "Come. I'm going to-morrow afternoon. Emily's leaving for the East just before; going to visit Mary's aunt in Ottawa. I go West. I'll wait for you at Laggan; you take the next train. We'll go anywhere you say. If my wife gets a divorce—I

think she will—I'll marry you as soon as you like; or I'll let you go when you're tired. I'll buy the world for you, and you can kick it around. Is that all right?"

Now she was adrift in space, indeed, and filled with the dazed contentment of one who has finally made a choice. She tried to say something, and then noticed they were slowing to a halt.

"What is it?" was all she found.

"The head-light's gone out," he said. "Wait till I light it." He left her side and stepped down, fumbling for a match. The glare of it lighted his ruddy smooth face for a moment. There was something kind and strong about him. She felt secure. He threw away the match. "Oil's out," he explained, as if he had few words now for material things, and went to the toolbox. She still sat tranced, but for a moment only.

"Oh, look!" she cried urgently. A little tongue of flame darted out from the road-side, flickered and raced in the old grass, spreading like oil on placid water. Edgerton stood staring. "Idiot!" shrieked Hope, springing over the back of the seat into the tonneau and seizing an armful of rugs. "Beat it out!"

The rugs alighted neatly over Edgerton's head; Hope went after them, and salvaged one without ceremony. Edgerton collected himself and another rug. The flames ran and fluttered in a little wind; they fought them in an obscure, hot glare, working breathlessly and wordlessly. For an awful five minutes they feared to see the whole country-side aflame. At the end of half an hour they leaned wearily against the rotund tire of the front wheel and took breath. The fire was out, and they felt they could have done no more.

"Light another match," said Hope. "I want to see if I have any hair left. My gloves saved my hands." The match spurted up; they looked into each other's

smear'd and blacken'd faces, and simultaneously showed two rows of startlingly white teeth in uncontrollable mirth. "You won't want to run away with me now," Hope gasped. "Do you always celebrate an elopement by setting the prairie afire? Oh, oh!" She clutched his arm weakly.

"Well, we started something, didn't we?" he said. "Come, I've got some things to attend to in town." He swung her up again, and kissed her cheek, but seemed fearful of encroaching further on her favour. He would take her gifts, but they must be given freely.

"I say, how did you get out of the tonneau? The door is shut."

"Guess," she said. "Now, show me how fast you can drive—— No, let me!" She hardly stopped laughing all the way back, and risked his neck a dozen times.

In his own rooms Edgerton did not wait to remove the soot and grime from his face, but went straight to the telephone. Long distance answered sleepily, but acted with despatch. If she had listened later, she might have been interested. And she might not if business bored her. It was her business to call Edmonton, and she did.

"Hello! hello! That you, Comerford? This is Edgerton. Edgerton. . . . No, I've changed my mind; don't want the charter renewed. I want it killed. I know it lapses to-morrow; I want it *killed*. I like my charters brand new . . . I want a new one. . . . Yes, I know it'll cost a little more than to extend the old one; never mind. . . . Shane's crowd had their chance. There'll be more room for you now. Get action with the bunch to-night; call me up in the morning. I'll leave full instructions here with Tennant; he's honest if he is a lawyer. Lawyer honest, sure. You understand?"

Evidently Comerford understood presently, and Edgerton rang off and called his lawyer.

"... I'm leaving to-morrow. . . . Organise a new company on that Kenatchee Falls deal . . . say, come and see me to-morrow morning at eight. I'll explain in detail: . . . Hell, no; don't get Shane; his crowd is out of it . . . business is business." He was not conscious of any irony. "To-morrow at eight. Good night."

So Tony's house of cards came down, blown upon by his own breath. And the irony of it was that he would never know the truth of how it happened.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was a foreign atmosphere about the familiar rooms; Mary put her hand to her forehead with a gesture of fatigue, and looked about her, almost petulantly, endeavouring to name the impression she had received. "It looks empty; yes, deserted," she thought. "Poor Hope seems able to have made a wilderness merely by thinking one. But I don't believe she calls it peace!" Mary would jest to her grave. But the rooms did look forlorn. There were things missing. She went into the bedroom and snapped on the light. Hope's brushes and mirror were gone! And in the sitting-room the drawing-board had been cleared; that was what she had felt. Mary turned about slowly, as if orienting herself, and went straight to the wardrobe. A battered leather suit-case should have been there. It also was gone!

Mary went back to the sitting-room and dropped limply into a chair, with a mental jerk at her clogged and distrait mind. She had been very busy all day; she had congratulated herself on being rid of a great deal of pressing business, and had come home to rest, to relapse temporarily into nothingness. Edgerton had taken himself off to the West; that was one relief. He had left death and destruction behind him, in a sense; Mary had seen him calmly tear down all the hopes of the men who had built on the Kenatchee Falls transaction, and had gathered from his manner that he felt a certain satisfaction in it. His demeanour had not invited comment, but they had just once exchanged a glance that said enough. And Mary had shrugged

her shoulders, and gone to work on the new company organisation.

Emily also had gone, eastward. Mary made a wry face at the recollection of that luncheon party, deferred a day, where Hope had actually appeared, with a spot of colour on each cheek and a devil in her eye. She had not spoken much, but there was something oddly different about her; she was abnormally self-possessed, ate nothing, and watched Emily with a look of impish humour. She was witty, too, with a kind of mad and topsy-turvy gaiety. She had left early. And then Mary, in the half-hour remaining, had done what she had to do. When she ended, there was no more Tony. They left the debris of him on the luncheon table, with the cold coffee cups.

It was cleverly done; neither Emily nor Tony ever knew what had really happened. His epitaph wrote him a small-town Lothario; the flowers Emily handed to the Pullman porter when her train drew out. And Mrs. Shane had sent her some of them! The rest Mary brought, a conscious tribute to her own work. Part of them were devoted mentally to the other hapless victims of her prowess, for Tony went down unhonourably in the wreck of a dozen local characters. She was far from wishing to fix him in Emily's mind by singling him out or bidding for a confidence. It was well done indeed.

And she deserved a breathing space, and now Hope, for whose sake she had laboured—— Where was Hope? When she found her she would—she would beat her! Ruefully Mary admitted it would do herself good, whether it helped Hope or not.

Panic fell on her suddenly, like the unexpected contact of icy water; her lethargy departed.

So Mrs. Hamilton found her, gazing about the room with a look of bewilderment and alarm, as if she

thought to discover someone concealed under the sofa.

"I've been looking for you, Mary," said Mrs. Hamilton, who was always calm, as a mother of four must be if she would escape shrewishness. "My, you look done up; you've been working late again."

"No, I've been dining with Mrs. Shane," said Mary. "Worse: Where is Hope?"

"She went out, with a suit-case, at seven o'clock. Just in time for the West train. Mary, I don't think that child looks well lately, and she ought not to be running around so. No sleep this week; out with that Kirby boy last night, and sitting up half the night before with a book. Don't say I said so; I know you girls can manage your own affairs. But I didn't like to see her going off that way without any dinner. I was bringing her some, but she'd gone. You get her to rest up." Probably she said more, but Mary did not hear.

Once Mary opened her mouth to say: "But Allen Kirby left days ago."

"I *will* beat her," she remarked instead. "She should have waited for me. That train's a local; it only goes to Banff. Mrs. Hamilton, be a darling, and help me pack. I've got to catch the Limited."

No doubt, Mary reflected afterwards, she made other explanation, but she could not remember what. Mrs. Hamilton never asked questions. She did not even look a question, but, thanks to her, Mary found herself aboard the Limited with the half of a split second to spare.

She had three hours to reassure herself that there had been no other train than the Banff local for Hope to take. As a side issue, she could reflect on the fact that Edgerton might be in Banff, rather than Laggan, where he had said he was going. And all the world goes to Banff. It is to Canada—to America almost—what Port Said is to the East. Wait there long enough and

tout le monde comes to you. So all the world might already be apprised of what Mary hoped to avert. Of course none would guess except her own little world—but there it was. Everyone from their own town spent week-ends at Banff. Though eighty miles distant, it amounted to a suburb. It was their one playground.

Edgerton was in Laggan, however. There was nothing for Hope to do but wait for the Limited, anathematising her own stupidity. She was eager to go on. Simply, she had to do something, the nearest thing, anything, but immediately. If she stopped she would want to die; that is, if she stopped to consider doing nothing at all. The three hours did not go so slowly. All the time her mind projected itself ahead, fixed itself still on doing something. The small, brightly lighted, lonely station, the smell of the pines, the feeling of the great calm mountains shrouding themselves in the neighbouring dark, became afterward a component part of her wild thoughts. Around the shoulder of the foot-hill was a little town, and great hive-like hotels, but she could not realise them. They meant people, and certainly she could not realise people just then, only Edgerton and herself. Fellow-travellers passed her, waiting in the station, or pacing the platform like herself. Some of them recognised her. She did not recognise them. They were isolated from her in that strange air of impermanence with which her mood invested time and place. When the Limited drew in, with a great discord of bells and whistles, and the platform filled with yet more and more people, coming or going, these were still unreal. Then Mary came towards her out of the crowd, vividly alive among all these ghosts, and she saw and seized on Hope with a sort of angry affection and a great relief.

"Where have you been?" she demanded absurdly.

"You—you—— Oh, I was distracted! But I've found you."

"I'm going away," said Hope determinedly, bracing her shoulders with an air of one refusing discussion.

"You're going back on the next train," announced Mary. "I'll see to that."

"Oh, Mary, please don't bother me," said Hope, with an unexpected pleading note. "I'll go mad if ever I have to see that town again. I *want* to go."

"Now, see here," began Mary, vehemence overcoming clarity of speech, as she dragged Hope off toward a wooden bench out of the swirl of traffic. People were elbowing them politely; a few stared for a moment in passing.

"But I must catch the train."

"Wait, wait a minute!" She sought for a tactful beginning, and then flung herself at the heart of the matter; there was no time for tact. "You're going on to meet Edgerton, aren't you?" Hope merely looked at her, like an obstinate child which will not say it is sorry. "Well, what has he ever done to you?"

"I like him," said Hope, which again was not what Mary expected.

"Very well, you like him! And you're going to make him miserable the rest of his life to prove it!" Trusting to blind feeling, Mary knew it was useless to ask Hope to consider prudence and her own side of the case. "What'll he do with you? What will you do with him? You've got what he wants, but you can't give it to him. He'd give you what you want, but he hasn't got it. His life is made for him; he has made it himself; you'll be taking him away from everything he's used to. He isn't your age; he'll get tired of everlastingly 'yearning beyond the skyline, where the strange ships go down.' He'll want his work, and the

men he knows. He hasn't your tastes; he'll be bored. After awhile he'll see you growing up, and away from him. And you'll be no nearer anything else. You'll always be on the outer edge of things, outside of the game; you won't have conformed to the rules. And by and by you'll leave him, find yourself—and he'll be sorry all his life." She paused for breath.

Hope stared at her searchingly, with a little strange laugh.

"Well," she said. "Really! Oughtn't he to know what he's doing? Why—why—what about me?"

"Settle that with yourself," said Mary gravely. "You'll have to anyway. But don't take out your unhappiness—your spite—on someone who never hurt you. What about me? Haven't I been fond of you? Why do you want to leave me to face what you've done? Do you think your friends will be spared?"

"My gracious," said Hope inadequately, "whose business is it but mine? Leave me alone, please, please. No one cares."

"That's what you thought about you and Tony," said Mary inexorably. "Nobody plays a lone hand."

"Oh," said Hope disdainfully, "you mean that someone is always looking over your shoulder and telling you how to play. But you pay your own losses. Oh, Mary, I want to go! And who on earth would know?"

"Everyone," insisted Mary. "His wife might learn, and spread it all over the country in the newspapers. Or she might exact half his fortune to keep silent. You'd be the flaw in his armour; you might cost him all he has spent his life building up. Then, if you did marry——"

"I don't want to marry him, or anyone," said Hope, goaded into utter frankness.

"Well," said Mary, "then you'll take a great deal

and give nothing. After all, a man's got his name, too. Hope, what if your own people should hear?"

"Would *you* tell them?" asked Hope stormily. "Well, I'll go back. Please be quiet, Mary." She dropped to the bench, and leaned her head against the station wall, closing her eyes. The purpose went out of her face; she looked spent again. "I can't do anything," she muttered. "But I must, I must."

The thought that obsessed her was that if she failed to do something, and that quickly, some spring of life in her would fail. A creeping drowsiness threatened her, which it would pain her to fight off, as one feels when the air supply is short. Some necessary element ~~had been taken from her in her great disillusionment.~~ She knew she needed action in the same way that one nearly drowned must be tided through by forced breathing and involuntary motion.

"Come to the hotel and rest till the next train," said Mary gently. "And get something to eat."

"No. I must explain to him. I will go back if you will go on up and tell him why I didn't come. He's looking for me on this train. Here's my ticket; you use it," said Hope practically. "And give him this." She went into the telegraph room, wrote and sealed a message. "Hurry, the train is starting; I won't go unless you do."

Mary began to protest, thought better of it, kissed Hope and ran. Perhaps Hope needed to be alone. And, in spite of all her arguments, Mary was sorry for Edgerton. Hope went back to her bench, sat down listlessly, and felt herself going, very far away, to the poppy fields of her childhood—but now the poppies were black. She did not want to live. Her idol was very completely broken, and its pitiful clay feet forbade her weeping over the wreckage. Her tears, she reflected sardonically, would reduce it to the utmost of

absurdity. So she sat, gazing into the dark. And when Ned Angell stopped before her, he had to speak twice before she seemed to hear.

"What?" she said at last, impolitely, and turned a blank stare on him. "Good evening, Ned." If she had shouted, "Go away," it could have been no plainer. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been up for the week-end," he said. "Hope, you look like a ghost. You're ill; for Heaven's sake, let me get you something. I have some brandy in my suit-case. What are you doing here?"

"Eloping," she retorted. It was the nearest she could come to shrieking, or hurling a brick at him. It served. He was unintelligible for several minutes, and she watched him stonily. She had come to a point where her own despair was no longer tragic to her, and in that was tragedy beyond words. In her mind cause and effect were ranged side by side in grotesque disproportion, grinning at her. She was as one mortally wounded by a stiletto thrust, who looks at the tiny wound with horrified unbelief, knowing that insignificant aperture for a gateway to eternity. She forgot Edgerton for the moment; Mary had rudely torn him out of the foreground of possibilities, thrust her back upon her own ridiculous catastrophe. And Ned was the last straw. He was offering her brandy! That reminded her, Edgerton had offered her the world. Probably Mary had it now; he might have been glad to be rid of it. "No, I really don't want any brandy," she said almost patiently, having produced her effect. "Yes, I was eloping, but I'm not. I changed my mind. Mary changed my mind. She's gone on."

"Who?"

"Mary Dark—oh, the man? I shan't tell you,

Neddy. If any of your friends happen along, they'll think it's you."

"I wish it was," he said, and the bare simplicity of his speech struck some chord in her that resolved her again into a merely pitiful girl, aware of another's hurt, and sorry for it.

"Why, Ned, not you; it isn't possible."

"But it is—Hope, I can't talk to you here." Again Hope was aware of people regarding them with vague curiosity; they were at the further end of the platform, a little isolated, but scarcely invisible; they regarded each other dramatically, uncertainly, with tense white faces and the hint of outflung hands, their eyes challenging and defensive; it was not strange if people stared. Ned knew it also, but he could not stop; he could only urge her: "You're tired; you are ill. The train won't be in for another hour or more; it's late. Have you had any supper? Come up to the hotel and rest a little."

Anywhere, she thought, to be rid of his immediate importunities. But the problem he presented she was grappling with ineffectually. It seemed she must be hopelessly imbecile. People were always surprising her now, turning to her unexpected surfaces, presenting her with new and incredible problems. Nothing was simple any more; it was all beyond her, amazing past conception. Everything that had seemed so plain and straightforward, all her everyday relations, took on a complexity that appalled her. Ned was not a harlequin, an incident; he was alive too; if one pricked him he bled. That much he was showing her, with all the fervour of a vain and mercurial nature, as they walked slowly in the green-dark obscurity of a by-path beside the road to the hotel.

"You must have guessed it," he insisted.

"No, I didn't," she sighed. "Why should I? I

don't think you ever said anything, did you?" She groped in her memory. Perhaps he had spoken; she so seldom listened to him closely. Mostly she had laughed at him, or put him aside as one does a troublesome child.

"Why do you suppose I was always coming?"

He was almost angry; in the heat of his new passion it seemed to him that he had always cared so much. Now that she had so nearly gone from him forever, she was all that was desirable and dear. He had for long past known her heart was turned from him towards another man; he had guessed it to be Tony Yorke. Certainty had been impossible; she had her dignity, and had placed him unmistakably, sometimes pointedly, outside her confidence. And slowly her inaccessibility had wrought on him. To-night, with the fine unreason of a new lover, he saw the whole world of men striving to tear her from him. That was the result of her challenge.

They were both rather mad, and it was night, and spring.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "After all, you were always about some other girl, too. You were always at Mrs. Patten's, for the matter of that." Her hand was on his arm, and she felt him start. "You don't really care so much, do you, Ned? Not now, anyway, when I tell you Tony jilted me, and I came so near to running away with—another man?"

"Oh, Hope, I do, I do! There's only you. I don't care about whoever else it was—— Do you care so much for Yorke?"

"No," she said slowly, "I don't care for anyone. It's all gone. But I'm tired." Presently she was weeping on his shoulder. "So tired. I haven't anything to give you."

He told her fervently that nothing was enough, if

he might only hope. In some sense his chivalry was touched. It is hardly a quality to build on, in a sentimentalist, but in the clash and chaos of old illusions fallen about her ears it seemed as solid as anything. But he only won when he put forward his own need as a plea. He wanted her! He did want her; he ached for her; she felt it dimly—she had got into his blood.

To her, who had wanted so much and whose hands were so empty, it seemed unbearable that such a plea should go unanswered. Two people wretched were too many.

She wished only to see someone else happy, to remind herself that there was such a thing as joy in the world. Out of her enormous inexperience she was assured that her life was lived. And here was a way to end it neatly. Again her early training asserted itself, disastrous as any good rule is applied at the wrong moment. He was urging her to marry him. Marriage meant the end of the old order, a beginning of new things. It was a solution to hand; and it answered Mary's requirements; it would be according to the rules of the game. And it would make Ned happy! In fact, it was a sacrifice on the altar of happiness; it was neither for herself nor for Ned, but for the sake of happiness itself. She hovered fearfully on the brink, delayed putting her hand to the bond with idle questions that in themselves committed her.

They had seated themselves on a fallen log, just beyond the path, to avoid belated strollers. A long, harsh whistle pierced the night; Hope sprang to her feet.

"The East train!" she cried. "We forgot it; it's gone."

"Then marry me to-night," Ned said.

Now she looked over the edge of the unknown and drew back a step.

"No. Why, two hours ago—— To-morrow you will think differently. Tell me to-morrow, if you do. I must go to the hotel and get a room. I tell you, I know we're insane."

"To-morrow I shall think the same," he said, and urged her again with wilder protestations, with the sheer strength of his own feelings.

He was intoxicated, beyond mere earthiness. He, too, had found romance. If Hope had been better able to draw an analogy, she would have made the woods echo with satiric mirth.

CHAPTER XVI

IF Mary had expected repose of mind after her embassy extraordinary to Edgerton, she was disappointed. She wanted Hope in plain sight, as a guarantee against any further outbreak of insanity, as she mildly termed it; and she did not even know where Hope was. She had nearly a week in which to exhaust her vocabulary of friendly abuse on nothing more tangible than a vague note from Hope posted at Banff and saying she needed a few days' rest and for Mary to notify the school of her intended absence.

During the week, between her anxious hours, the memory of that interview recurred to her. Edgerton had taken it as she might have known he would, had she paused beforehand to conjecture. His first look of alarm at sight of her, visible to her searching eye, despite his forced immobility of countenance; the expectancy that looked beyond her—for what, she did not have to guess—and the way he had squared his shoulders and hardened his face to the blow when she blurted out her errand; all this she could have foreseen. She might also have expected anger at her meddling, a disposition to brush her aside and take what had been in his grasp, or more weakly to plead his cause. He had done neither.

"Was she afraid of me, after all?" he asked finally, with a touch of mingled shame and shyness.

"No," said Mary. "She wanted to come." He rose to his feet; Mary shook her head quickly. "Not now. You'll have to blame me; she won't come now. Think

for yourself; was it fair?" She turned the other edge of the same argument on him.

"No," he muttered, "I knew it wasn't. And I wanted to help her." He did not say that he had justified himself with the belief that she was now no longer a child, nor perhaps even a maid. He did think that. The sense of futility he had felt before overcame him. "Oh, well—Miss Dark, will you be her friend? I—I guess I can't. And if there is anything I can do, let me know."

"I am her friend," said Mary, and knew it was time to go. "By the way, perhaps I'd better—resign?"

"Hell, no!" He turned on her. "Excuse me. But I guess I need you, too. Stay, if you don't mind. If you won't leave me anything else, you might at least stick around." He laughed.

"Thank you," said Mary, and went, to find that matters were not, after all, closed, and to wait in much disquiet for whatever else might chance.

But she was at work when Hope returned, and there had been no further message. Mrs. Hamilton was out, also. Hope let herself in. Only Bobby came running to welcome her with gurglings and unintelligible words of joy. She dropped her suit-case and caught him up in her arms, throwing back her veil and looking about as one returned after long wandering looks at half-forgotten places. Her face was subdued, and more than usually pale. Bobby was heavy, but she clasped both arms about him and sat down, holding him tight. He pulled at her necklet.

"Booful," he commented gravely.

"Yes, dear," she said inattentively, her glance still ranging about the room.

Everything was the same! To Mary it had all been different; and they were equally surprised. She sat waiting, until the door-bell rang. Then she rose with

an air of meeting something expected. Yet, when Lisbeth Patten stood revealed on her threshold, it was plain she had thought to see someone else.

"Lisbeth," she cried. "But I am glad to see you! Come in. Were you looking for Mary? She's not home yet!"

"No, I was looking for you," said Lisbeth. She was breathing a little quickly. "Did you just get back from Banff?"

"From Banff? I was—oh, yes, I just got in. Do you know, it seems a long time since I've seen you? Weeks, isn't it? You look well, Lisbeth."

"Do I?" Lisbeth was strangely restless; she walked across the room and back, sat, and rose again, to choose another chair. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

Hope flushed unaccountably.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so." She was suddenly constrained. "Shall we have some tea? I need something."

Mrs. Patten seemed uncertain, said "no" and "yes," and finally sat still tensely, while Hope went to the kitchen for the kettle. Bobby stared at her solemnly a moment, until she bent a sudden glance on him, whereat he fled kitchenwards also. Hope came back alone.

"I met Ned a few minutes ago," said Mrs. Patten at last.

"Did you?" asked Hope, and even while she spoke wondered why her words had been so non-committal.

"Yes." There was a long pause. "He was in Banff, too, wasn't he?"

"Why, yes." Now Hope was really surprised; she had never seen Lisbeth like this. She looked like one who goes to meet a shock; her face was deadly calm, and her eyes feverish. Her long, beautiful hands occupied themselves mechanically with the teacup; her

straight brows, drawn together a trifle, gave her regular features a little the look of a Greek tragedy mask. She was biting her full red underlip nervously. Lisbeth had the mouth of the "Autrichienne," a lovely, impractical, passionately impulsive mouth, that gave the lie direct to her thoughtful forehead. "He must have told you."

"He wrote me," said Mrs. Patten. "But I didn't think he meant—— He's always having romantic fancies, and he's always told me——" She paused, catching her breath.

"Told you—what? What is it, Lisbeth? Say it!" Hope spoke with unconscious imperativeness.

"Hope, you don't care for him," said Lisbeth desperately. "Show him you don't. Of course, you were always friends; I care for you, too. You didn't think of him that way! You've been unhappy, too; you know what it's like—I'm a fool, I know it—but don't take him from me." Her hands were trembling now; the cup and saucer clinked musically. "You could never give him what I could—what I have—— Send him away!"

"Why—why?" said Hope, in a kind of fearful whisper. "Does it really make any difference?"

"It's true, then?" said Lisbeth. She put down the cup and put her hands to her eyes. "You mean to marry him! But why do you want to? You *couldn't* love him so soon. I didn't believe him; I came to see you. You did promise?"

"Promise—what?" repeated Hope uncertainly, and again: "Does it make so much difference to you?"

"All the difference," said Lisbeth. "He—I—we——" She uncovered her face, and let the rest go unspoken. "You see, that's why I can come and ask you—to send him away."

"How can I?" asked Hope. "We—were married—five days ago."

Mrs. Patten rose, looked about her blindly, and dropped back in a swoon.

The pressing need of the moment, to see Lisbeth open her eyes again, to bring back the colour to her pale lips and know she had not all unwittingly actually killed the woman she truly cared for, automatically shut Hope off from consideration of her own plight. She was like a man injured in a railway wreck, who does not notice the pain because there are others in still greater distress. She ran for water and dabbled it on Lisbeth's forehead, spoke to her distractedly, holding the pretty helpless head against her bosom. When Lisbeth sighed and her lids fluttered, Hope clasped her closer, and a tear, of which she was unconscious, fell on Lisbeth's cheek. Lisbeth put up her hand to it, and said almost pettishly:

"That's enough, dear; I'm all right." Then she looked up and said, "Oh!"

She sat upright, and they sat staring at each other dumbly, their glances imploring pardon, each for what she had done. If either of them had known, before it was too late; before they had acted or spoken! They were dismayed at the irrevocableness of deeds and words. How was it possible that two people who had never had any but the gentlest thoughts of each other could so devastate each other's lives? Why, it was silly! That was what Lisbeth meant, though her words were:

"I—I think I must go. Is my hair——" Her mouth began to tremble; she stopped, then went on, "It's wet; have you a handkerchief or something?"

Hope gave her a handkerchief and said:

"Can't you forgive me—ever?" Her words sounded strange and irrelevant in the face of Lisbeth's obvious

determination to withdraw herself definitely, to turn back the page.

"I don't need to. I—am fond of you—just as much. Sometime——" She dabbed her eyes again, choking at the thought of that intervening, empty space between "now" and "sometime." "I should like to talk to you again," she said wistfully. "Not now—it's better—not." She looked about, as if for a way of escape, not from the room, but from the net of life.

"May I have some powder?" she said at last.

After putting it on with great care, she walked to the door, holding her chin up, and paused with her hand on the knob. The bell rang sharply, cutting off something she would have said. Hope started and paled; for the first and last time, Lisbeth saw her look frightened. She understood instantly, before the ring ceased.

"No," she said, "don't do anything. Don't you see? We've got to go through with it. *Don't let him know.* You mustn't. Not for me; for both of you. Dear, I hope you'll be happy." She smiled, but even while she smiled, her chin went higher, stiffly; as if something in her throat hurt her. Then she turned the knob, and was face to face with Ned.

He had not her preparation; if it had been less than impossible, he would have fled. Everything that Hope already knew was written in his face, which set like that of one guarding against a blow.

"Hello, Ned," said Lisbeth, her voice light and cool and faintly mocking. "I was just going; sorry. Some other time, perhaps? Good-bye, Hope." Suddenly she went back, leaving Ned gaping, stooped and kissed Hope on the cheek. "Good-bye," she repeated, and went out.

Instantly Hope was aware that, of the two who but now had been before her, the one she loved most was

gone! And what should she say to Ned? All she knew was that there was one thing she must not say.

Lisbeth's wishes, aside from any other consideration, prevented.

"I didn't think you could get through so soon," she said finally.

Ned drew a long breath, perhaps of relief. That was not what he had expected.

He had been to the bank to report. "They thought I needn't go back till to-morrow," he said.

Hope reflected, watching him, that he looked absurdly young, so that it did not seem possible to hate him. It is hard to hate any young thing; one can only feel annoyed, and possibly aghast at its capacity for mischief. She did not know how shockingly young she looked herself. Ned had been to his rooms, evidently; he was brushed and shining, shaven, wearing a fresh suit and immaculate linen; his rather handsome eyes looked anxiously at her, like those of a puppy convicted of chewing up a slipper, but his mouth was sulky, and he fidgeted with his hat. Hope never knew, then or afterwards, in just what light he appeared to himself. But at the bottom of his heart he knew he had done an unforgivable thing, and yet he felt it wrong that any poor weak mortal should be able to do just such a thing.

There ought, it seemed to him, to be no unforgivable thing possible. It was like having the punishment of a god, without the prerogatives. There *must* be forgiveness for him, somehow. Had he not performed a man's duty—married? It was, to say the least, demoralising to be damned for a thing so commendable! He was staggered at the vast gulf yawning between the requirements of a man's own soul and of society; he had never known before that such a discrepancy was possible. And Hope stood before him as the em-

bodiment of both his soul and society, since she was the woman he loved and the woman he had married.

The incongruous part of it was that he had not been thinking of society when he had married; he had done that for the satisfaction of his soul; and now his soul accused him, and society was satisfied.

Lisbeth had shown him that; she had left him to settle her account in his own heart.

Of course he had not time to think of these things at the moment; but he knew them, nevertheless. He merely went on to say:

"I have to go back up town, though; my trunk seems to be lost. Shall I come back and get you for dinner?"

"Yes, if you wish," said Hope. What else was there to say?

She had hardly moved when Mary came a little later and her eyes were dry. She merely looked perplexed and languid. Without prelude, she flung the fact of her marriage at Mary, in a manner almost indifferent.

"*Gott!*" remarked Mary, and sat down on Hope's hat.

Hope observed the incident, and said casually:

"Be careful of the hatpin."

"Lisbeth was here awhile ago," she added, looking at Mary closely.

Beyond the need of words, Mary's expression was saying: "You unspeakable idiot! You poor child!" At mention of Lisbeth, her face grew inscrutable.

"Did you tell her? What did she say?" she asked.

"What do you suppose?" said Hope, and Mary knew. "After all, I wonder if——"

"If I wouldn't have done better to mind my own business at first?" supplied Mary acutely. "Well—we don't really know." She thought of Emily, of Edgerton, of Yorke, even, whose destinies she had managed

to control through at least one crucial moment, and looked at Hope, for whose sake she had done it all, and who had brought it all to naught. "I did everything beautifully—except the one thing I set out to do," she said at last. "By the way, where have you been all the time?"

"We went down to Foster's ranch—I didn't know them; they live down below Canmore. Ned's been there before, fishing. It's very pretty."

It was a relief to both of them to drop the dangerous subject, but they could not quite keep away from it.

"And what are you going to do now? I mean, where shall you live—and all that?"

"*Quién sabe?*" Hope looked around the light, cheerful room, and felt a sudden anticipatory home-sickness for it. "Oh, Mary, what shall I do?"

But Mary confessed frankly that in the rôle of Providence she had come to the end of her resources.

"But for this," she asked only, "could you have been happy with him? Were you?"

Hope flushed violently.

"I thought we should get on all right," she said simply.

"Maybe you will," said Mary more cheerfully. "Remember, time is a great solvent, if one can wait for it."

"I will try," said Hope. "I understand you. It is my business now to bring this out right. If only he hadn't come in and found Lisbeth here!"

There, in truth, was the difficulty. What had passed between the two women Ned did not know, and for many reasons he dared not ask. As she went to the door, Lisbeth had walked between them and drawn an invisible line, left a shadow, and Hope could not and Ned would not overstep it. So they remained

apart, watchful, brooding, as they sat that night at dinner on either side the table. Four days of it they had, and all the time the distance grew and grew. This, thought Hope, was an impossible situation—but would it be the better if one or other of them dragged the truth to light? Could he ever forgive her for forgiving him such a thing? If she had never known, or if he had never guessed she knew, he might in time have put it away from him, locked his mind on it all, and been made a man by the power of that "pity and terror" of the ancients. There are some things none will risk twice after facing once. And sometimes punishment fails of its effect by being too thorough; it leaves nothing to be redeemed. The subtle Chinese call this "losing face," than which death is better.

"Isn't it time you made the announcement of your marriage?" asked Mary, after those days had passed. "And what have you decided to do?"

"Nothing," said Hope. "Ask Ned. I can't. Do you know where he is now?" Mary did not. "He is seeing Lisbeth somewhere."

"For what?"

"She wanted to. I learned by accident—he lies so badly. And I know her handwriting. I think I understand; she doesn't know what she wants, but she feels as if she's got to see him—to convince herself. I felt that way about Tony; that's why I wanted to do something else, quickly, not to humiliate myself. Ned went because he's afraid. Please don't tell anyone yet." Hope was still with Mary, in their old apartment. Whatever rumour might be abroad of her, there was no certitude. "Wait till this evening," she said finally. "Perhaps I can tell you then."

She did come to a decision, and Mary, after a momentary casting about for some argument in rebuttal, acquiesced.

"I shall have to go away," she said, "end it before it's really begun. I've tried—but haven't we broken the contract already? We said we would be 'not afraid with any amazement,' and we are—we are! But the real reason is that he won't help. I tried him out; I told him I was thinking of going home for a short visit, and would he mind? Mary, he looked glad! Well, it's too much for me, that's all. Do you know," she added thoughtfully, "I don't think he got what he expected out of it, either."

"I should think not," said Mary dryly.

Poor Ned, he had grasped his bubble, had waded through the uttermost depths of dishonour to reach it, and it had broken in his hand.

He knew she was going forever. She did not tell him; it was not needed. They could see each other with terrible distinctness. They could not reach each other. He went to the station with her, for what reason they did not quite know; perhaps because it did not seem to matter. At the last moment they clasped hands quickly and fell apart again, looking at each other with a kind of desperation, a silent confession of inability to grapple with the problem each presented to the other. She did not look out of the window as the train drew out.

Mary had asked her as she packed:

"Do you never cry, Hope?"

"I can't," said Hope, as if that, too, were beyond her strength. "But I know I shall—after a while."

She thought she would go and look at the sea. It was so powerful, so old, so always new, so beautiful and without pity. She did not want pity.

Packed away neatly she had half a dozen letters from Mary to people who might be able to help her find a footing. But that part of the future did not seem to matter so much. Mary knew people all over

the world, and reassured her needlessly as to her ability to make her way in some sort.

"I thought you meant to come with me," said Hope.

"I promised to stay," said Mary.

So she went alone, as she had come.

PART II

THE FORTY-SIXTH LATITUDE

CHAPTER XVII

THE carpet was red, and a red-flowered screen stood in front of the wood-fire in the grate. A rose-coloured lantern hung over the electric lamp. In the tempered light Hope looked not a day older. Perhaps she should not have; three years is no great time in the early twenties. But to Mary's quietly observant second glance it was plain she was thinner, and her sleepy eyes seemed larger, still softly blue, but impenetrable. Inquiring eyes still, now they volunteered nothing; and her thinness brought out strongly the salient line from chin to ear.

"I never noticed the visible sign of her obstinacy before," thought Mary, saying aloud:

"You're pretty sometimes, Hope."

"What a backhander," remarked Hope. "Would you like me to tell you you must have been pretty once? I look a hag by daylight. Did you come all this way to flatter me? Tell me all the news instantly. Oh, if I could tell you how I've missed you!"

"Well, I *was* pretty once," remarked Mary placidly. "That's no mean consolation—at thirty. And I came all this way to beat you. You should be strong enough to stand it now; you weren't when you left."

"Maybe I'm not now," said Hope. "I nearly killed myself kicking against the pricks for a long, long time."

If I look well-preserved, it's because I pickled myself in brine of my own making. I had to stop when I found I was getting nerves. Extraordinary things, nerves. Have you any?"

"Enough," said Mary. "You never told me, in your letters?"

"About my teapot tempests? They weren't worth it." She rose and went across the room to pick up a fan of carved sandalwood, but merely played with it, as if her hands demanded occupation. And she no longer relaxed into her chair, but seemed always ready to leave it again. It was true; she had made immense drains on her reserve vitality, and she knew herself that now she lived from day to day, storing up nothing. But it did not seem a matter of moment. "But news, woman, news!" she demanded.

"I think I must have written you everything," said Mary. "That Lisbeth's gone abroad—I was so glad when the money came to her."

"Is she happy?" asked Hope softly, almost as if afraid of the word.

"There are several kinds of happiness," said Mary. "Yes, she has hers. Did you know that she hoped you would write?"

"No. But I am glad. I suppose we felt just the same! I wanted her to write. How is Con—Mr. Edgerton?"

"He's made another million," said Mary, laughing. "And he sent you this. I saved it till you should ask." She reached into the bosom of her gown and drew out a carved gold bracelet, held on a ribbon. "I was so afraid of losing it. He said you had such round arms."

"He does remember me," said Hope, with mirth in her eye.

"Do you remember him?"

And Hope showed herself different.

"You want to know if I regret him? No, but I'm glad I knew him. What a plague he missed! I don't believe I regret anything much—what's done is done—except——"

"Except who?"

"Except Allen Kirby." And Hope laughed at the open surprise in Mary's face. "I wonder what became of him, and I'll never know."

"I daresay you do," said Mary drily. "He was the only one who escaped you, wasn't he? Well, I used to envy you both sometimes; you were so young. You are very comfortable here."

It was comfortable, if shabby; there was room enough, a big window for the drawing-board, large chairs in which the mistress of the place could be pleasantly swallowed up, and the spiritual consolation of an open fire. Hope had taken it over *in toto* from some migrating bachelor tenant, and, characteristically, had altered nothing in it, unless by a very few small additions.

"Yes," she said, grinning, "you can let your soul down here; there's not an atom of taste in it to live up to. Nothing to clash with my Art! And that Chinese lantern is the greatest labour saver. When I haven't time to dust, I simply drop that over the lamp. I call the whole place The Tub!"

"You pup!" remarked Mary, in her delicious, well-bred tones. "Hope, does your Art progress?"

"Well, you've seen it," said Hope dubiously. She drew for a coloured Sunday fashion page of a city daily—large-eyed and sweetly simpering girls in meticulously up-to-date frocks—and filled in during the week with whatever might be required of her in the way of special illustrations, some of which betrayed an impish humour that struggled through her limited technique with more or less success. "I don't think

it's a topic for polite conversation. Ask me how I like Seattle; nobody has for nearly a year and I miss the dear old question."

"How do you like Seattle?"

"Very much. A newspaper is rather fun, isn't it?"

"It gives you the key of the fields, to a certain extent," agreed Mary, in whose mind that point had special importance just then. "Have you many friends here?"

Hope shook her head, rose, and walked about the room again.

"No," she said. "Acquaintances—some agreeable people. I can't seem to put anyone in the place you and the others occupied. Oh, I have been so lonely, but I didn't want new people. But look, I like this better than the dust and desolation I left." She drew back the curtain. Mary came and stood beside her. The house stood on top of one of Seattle's myriad hills, and over the roofs of the buildings that dropped away like a vast dark stairway to the harbour they could see far down, to a galaxy of twinkling lights that marked the mast-heads of ships from all the ports of the world. And a climbing rose peered in at the casement from the violet dusk. "I like all that," said Hope. "I daresay I'm romantic yet. Sometimes I go down to the docks and mouse around for hours, sniffing at bales of stuff in tea-matting and piles of square timber—smells of spices and cedar and the salt water—and Chinamen and bilges," she broke off, laughing. "There are weird shops down there, too, and yellow-faced people, and big tall turbaned men with black beards—Sikhs. And lumberjacks and sailormen. I wish I could really draw. You must come down tomorrow. No, I haven't really any friends. Oh, bother!"

The door-bell was tinkling apologetically. She

dropped the curtain and went across the room quickly, but drew the door open only a few inches. Mary had a momentary glimpse of a tentative looking young man, quite a personable youth, holding his hat in his hand in a manner ludicrously suggestive of one waiting for instructions. He must have said good evening, at least, but Hope did not listen.

"I'm sorry, Ches," she said. "I forgot; and I'm busy. I want to talk to Mary to-night. She came a day early. I don't believe I'll have any time this week—why, yes, you might take us round to see the town; I never thought of that. Telephone me; good night." She closed the door again with decision, and the tentative youth apparently ceased to exist.

"Well, if you haven't any friends, I should think you must have a few enemies," suggested Mary mildly.

"Who—Ches Landry? Oh, bosh!" She seemed to think that enough, but amplified, with a yawn, "I didn't say I was a hermit. It serves him right," she added darkly.

"Because he's a man?"

"Oh, no—really, I have a sense of humour left. He's merely an example of it. The first time I met him he said he didn't like me, and I heard about it!"

Envisioning that waiting attitude, Mary said:

"Nero was at that rate a great humourist. Do you jest often?"

"Now, you're inquisitive," said Hope defensively. "Well, there was one other; but I wasn't the humourist that time. Perhaps you'll appreciate this, so I will divest myself of honour and tell you. I had a proposal here—one. His name doesn't matter, but there's his portrait." She tossed over a photo of another man, not so young quite, but still ornamental, wearing that peculiar expression of insouciance almost typical of the

man who, with every opportunity to succeed, still fails. Just such a look Tony Yorke had. "He didn't belong here, and he clung to my hearthstone like a drowning mariner."

"A drowning mariner," reflected Mary audibly, "really might make a better choice of something to cling to than a hearthstone."

"So might this party," retorted Hope promptly. "I was just telling you he was a stranger here, and 'that's how it all began.' I became quite an agreeable habit to him, and, falling in with what I suspect was another habit of his, he proposed. He told me that he had had his romance, and no doubt I had had mine; he could not ask my first girlish love, or words to that effect, and hoped I felt the same. I was positively quite sympathetic, and he told me how his heart had been blighted. She was all that was lovely and good, but neither of 'em had much money, so she married another man who had. It broke their hearts, of course, but what could they do? He gave her his blessing. Do you know—would you believe it—he really thought she had done something highly creditable in landing the man with money! Yes, he respected her for it! I simply goggled at him, and asked why on earth they couldn't have taken a chance and lived on what he earned. I shall never forget his answer. He said I didn't understand—she was too fine and rare—why, she paid fifteen dollars a pair for her shoes! I told him I did, too, sometimes, and earned the money myself. We weren't really *simpatico*, after that."

"But are you divorced—did you tell him you were free?" Truly Hope had changed.

"I did not," said Hope. "I do not tell anything to anyone. Mary, do you just happen to know anything about Ned? Where is he—and what—and why?"

"I believe he is back in Montreal, still in the bank,"

said Mary. "Of course, you know his people, after everything——"

"Ah, yes, that's something else I should like to know now. What was 'everything'? People did hear of it, then?"

"Oh, heavens," said Mary, "it was a nine days' wonder; everyone knew, and no one knew just how it got about. If I had felt like laughing, I'd have laughed myself weary, watching them try to make up their minds to ask me, and not doing it. Ned closed up like a clam, too. And his people heard, and he went home suddenly, and went into the bank again at home. That's all I know. Do you still think——"

"No. I was just curious." She sighed a little, and poked the fire absently. It was late spring, but the evenings were still refreshingly cool. "I forgot to ask about Emily Edgerton."

"She's engaged to someone I don't know—a man from the East, I think," said Mary. "I saw her awhile ago; she's quite wonderful."

One other, too, she had forgotten to ask about. Not once did she mention Tony Yorke's name, and at the end of the visit Mary was convinced it was from neither pride nor pique, but because she did not care. But then neither did she seem to care much for anything; that inquiry in her eyes was terribly impersonal. Mary had come to see, and now she did not like what she saw. Once she had vowed she would never again play *deus ex machina*, but what was a vow against a friend? Mary thought deeply during the week of her stay, and sifted Hope's life to the bottom. In it she found only husks and a few vivid memories; poor food for a soul that must fare as it may. Hope had grown—she even looked physically taller, perhaps because of her thinness—she was a woman, now, but she had not come into a woman's heritage.

The episode of Ches Landry served as a keynote to her emotional state. Hope had really told it all in the one sentence. When she met him she had had her face turned from men in apathy, hardly in scorn; and his casual flouting of her had affected her strangely. Was she not desirable—she, who had been torn by the very claws of desire? It was to make nothing of her griefs, and, in short, she would not endure it. And then, having vindicated her right, to her own woe, he was nothing to her. He had never kissed her lips; more, he had hardly touched her hand. She made a casual confession of that to Mary, and turned her emotions inside out briefly for her friend's enlightenment.

"I understand, now; I haven't got my astounding ignorance for an excuse. So I can't play at it all any more. Con used to kiss me sometimes, and it just meant to me that he was kind and I liked him. What should I do if I met him again? Well, I'm sorry about Ches—that is, if I've hurt him; he never said—I was a cat; I won't do it again. But you can see it's those terms or nothing; and he doesn't go away. There won't be any others, probably."

"You flatter yourself," said Mary.

"No, I don't," said Hope. "I used to. I was always weaving nets and throwing them to the winds to snare love. Not for any one man—but every girl's like that—you know yourself, you find what you're looking for. Like a sailor whistling up a wind; it's our attitude. If it hadn't been for that, should I ever have taken Ned seriously? Why, I thought that men *might* die for love; not that I quite foresaw him in such extremity, but it seemed a terrible thing for me—as if every touch of fever might be mortal! Maybe love does make the world go round; but at that, I needn't have imagined it would stop turning because a young

cub sighed in vain after some particular girl." She laughed lightly.

If in the face of that declaration it seemed foolish of her to be still so spent and undone, the point were missed. She suffered not from the mere loss of the desired object, but from the moral shock of seeing Tony as he was, and the following revelation of her marriage. To have her sand castle swept away by the tide was perhaps no great matter—but what dead men's bones had come to light in the backwash!

And now she firmly believed she was done with all that.

"Read Merimée," said Mary. "He has wisdom for you." She quoted: "'You have troubles of the mind, pleasures of the mind, but the viscera called heart is developed at 25 years of age only, in the forty-sixth latitude. When you shall have a heart for good . . . you shall regret the good old days when you were living only by the mind, and you shall see that the evils which make you suffer now are only pinpricks in comparison with the stabs which shall rain on you when the days of passion come!'"

"Yes, no doubt," said Hope rather absently, but with a sudden unlooked-for kindling of energy in eyes and figure. "No; I mean, you're wide of the mark. You know why I was so anxious to have you come now."

"I thought you wanted to see me," Mary offered.

"So I did, idiot! But it was to say *morituri, te salutamus*. I am going away."

"Now, you've forestalled me," said Mary, with mild disgust. "I came to make you go. And where?"

"To find the forty-sixth latitude? No, of course not. I'm going to find the other things. There are other things, aren't there? No sentimental journey: I feel so—so *ridiculous*, after sitting around moping for three

years. If you want to express a similar opinion, do so."

"No, I decline to waste words. But tell me, what do you really hope to find?" All Mary's worldly wisdom was in the anxious glance she bent on Hope. This romanticism—how it could disguise itself, reappear smiling with a fresh face! "Do you hope to be famous?"

"The woman is mad," scoffed Hope. "Famous? I? No. But I'm going to get *something*," she said, with an assumption of dark mysteriousness that did not conceal a real determination.

"But what?" asked Mary rather wildly.

"I'll tell you when I get it." She sobered suddenly.

"Why, Mary, I thought you believed in life?"

"Yes—no—of course I do. The only people who don't commit suicide."

"Too dogmatic. Some of 'em live just through inanition. Well, I'm going after the thing we believe in, whatever it is. It doesn't seem to be love."

"Much you know about love," scoffed Mary, under her breath.

Hope divined the words, and answered them only with an impudent sidelong glance.

"Whatever it is," she repeated calmly. "Maybe the thing itself is only knowledge of what it is. Giggle at my grandiloquence, if you like; but also admire my practical nature. I have a tender young shoot of a bank account already, provision against the seven lean years while I shall be walking around the walls of Jericho blowing my trumpet."

"Blowing your nose," returned Mary in mild exasperation. "When you mix your allusions, do it thoroughly. Now, why must you take the wind out of my sails, when my heart was set on meddling again?"

She meddled so far as to press an emergency fund

on Hope of a hundred dollars. She did not mention that the money was not her own, but said it could be easily spared. In fact, it came from Edgerton, a sort of last tribute. He saw her, at Mary's determination—already confided to him—receding still further from him, in time and physical distance; and speeded her with gifts and garlands, like a Hawaiian host.

A week was all too short, Hope said pleadingly, for Mary's visit, which had been long deferred. She was silenced when Mary at last divulged her reason for haste.

"My divorce is to be heard," she said, "very shortly, before the Senate."

"Why, Mary!" Hope almost shrieked, "I never knew you were married!"

"No?" said Mary interestedly. "I suppose I forgot. I had left all that behind me in the East. Some people there knew it, of course; I believe I took you for granted. But you never heard gossip. You are so tactful, though, that no doubt that was why I thought you never mentioned it. You have a tactful *heart*. You ought to get a divorce yourself. No family should be without one."

"It's expensive," said Hope dubiously. "And what would I do with it? I have so many other things to do. How does it come you are getting one now? You see, my heart has hardened."

"Because at last I have been able to produce a reason that convinces my worthy uncle." Mary smiled. "You shall hear it some time. Uncle is putting the divorce through quietly, and paying for it. With his influence, there will be no trouble—nor publicity. Now, we must plan for your descent on the great world."

They talked of that, and did not mention the divorce again.

So Hope was a-wing again when Mary left; or if not yet, still she was poised for flight; her resolution was made. There remained only the summer for preparation.

The curious thing about this was that she was going with neither joy nor interest, but merely urged by something iron in her own soul that refused to be still and rust.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER nearly a week in the train Hope felt that she never again wished to move one inch from where she lay. It was a long, long way she had come, not only in that week, but in all the years since she had left home, and when the persistent daylight at last crept under her eyelids she merely turned and dragged another pillow over as a bulwark. New York was waiting for her to come out and conquer it, but at least it could not break into her hotel room and demand to be conquered immediately.

How bare the walls of an hotel room were. And they were all the background she had achieved. They must be furnished and decorated. What a lot of time she had wasted. Well, she would think about that tomorrow. She was hovering again on the verge of sleep, and beginning to feel hungry at the same time, when the sound of a turning knob brought her up sharply, a trifle wild-eyed, confronting the opening door with a ready-to-spring expression—much as if she suspected New York was indeed about to enter and demand either conquest or surrender.

"Who's there?" she cried. Her tone was so fierce that the maid, whose latch-key had served since Hope forgot, in the weariness of the night before, to shoot the bolt, started and dropped an armful of towels. "I beg your pardon," both women said fervently and simultaneously, and Hope added, "Do come in. I should like to hear a human voice."

The maid, a cheerful and not uncomely person, past

her first youth, still looked rather alarmed, but entered.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you," she said. "It's a nice morning. I thought I'd seen you leave; I guess it was the lady next door."

"I will soon," Hope promised. "But I have just come from the Pacific Coast, and I need some rest."

"Really?" The maid also probably suffered from loneliness in her rounds. "I always thought I'd like to go there. But my folks live here, and I guess it's silly to throw up a good job and run off on a wild goose chase."

"Isn't it?" Hope agreed cordially, and wished Mary could hear. "Is your work nice here?"

"Oh, yes; we have a lovely housekeeper. I'm her assistant, but we're short-handed now, so I have to do this."

"Then you might take me on," said Hope. "I used to be a room maid; I know enough to put the wide hem at the top, and I can put a pillow in a case without holding it in my teeth, and heaps of things."

"You were—oh, you're joking." The woman smiled, glancing at the silver-backed brushes and mirror on the dressing-table, and then at a *crêpe negligé* lying across the foot of the bed. Hope dressed to please herself, she said, and was extravagant in peculiarly personal ways.

"No, I'm not. And I came to New York to look for work."

"I guess you'll find it, all right," said the maid consolingly, laying out fresh towels with mathematical precision and small haste, glad of a pretext to linger. "This is a big town. What do you aim to do?"

"Draw pictures." Hope was rather enjoying herself; she told herself gravely that the footboard of the

bed was a back fence, and she was really getting acquainted with New York.

"Well, you must be clever," said the good-hearted creature. "Maybe I'll see them some day in the magazines."

"I'm going to attack the newspapers first," said Hope, smiling. "If I'm not good enough for them, maybe the magazines will do. And when I have spent my last nickel for a bun to eat in the park—I understand that's the thing to do—I'll come back here and ask you to take me on. Whom shall I ask for?"

"Mrs. Merrick. I'll certainly do it," said the other cordially.

Hope wondered where Mr. Merrick might be—wondered how many New York held of such unattached married women as herself.

"Now," she said, scrambling out of bed, "since I have an anchor to windward, I can go forth with confidence. Me for the shops." As she had avowed to Mary, she intended to "put up a front."

She went about dressing, gurgling a song into her shower bath and later executing a *pas seul* with only one shoe on, in a moment of unreflective enthusiasm.

So for three days she deployed and skirmished on the shops, with a wholly feminine joy of conflict. The vast city, mile on mile of brick and stone, filled her with mingled admiration, horror, and a sense of her own insignificance. In her moments of depression it was to her like a senseless triumph of destruction; for man had obliterated the face of nature, and, like some malevolent upheaval of primal forces, left scarcely a blade of grass alive where he had passed. Again, when she walked the length of Fifth Avenue on a sunnily cool morning, the glitter and lightness of it, the marvellous windows and the dainty women who went by like artificial lilies of the field, were a magnificent

show, useless, perishable, but infinitely costly and so remote from the common soil, so far from the strong roots of the world on which they flourished like rare parasites on the top of a great tree, as to carry a suggestion of the utter unreality of fairyland. The impression was heightened, perhaps, by Hope's peremptory need of human companionship, and the knowledge that to these people she did not exist; she might have "cried on them and they would not hear." But for a greeting once a day from Mrs. Merrick, who in truth came out of her way for it each morning, she had spoken to no one in New York.

"Why, it's worse than solitary confinement," she exclaimed suddenly, having reached the Plaza, pushed on and on, walking with that light elastic step she had gained on the prairie, and, traversing Central Park, come out at the upper end against fresh rows of stolid brick and mortar. "I can't get out—nor in!" A city of enchantment and terror and paradox. "It is big," she conceded, and for a long time pondered of what it reminded her, waking with a start to the conscious recollection of those endless reaches of soft dun-coloured landscape that had been her childish world. But there had been an end to that—when she had grown up to it—there must be to this. Some way to pierce or surmount it. "It's so big," she reflected again, "I'll have to find a little, little crack, and creep through like a mole; I want to get to the heart of it. I suppose I'd better begin!"

So she took a bus back to the Washington Arch, and thence, with splendid ostentation that concealed a doubt of her own ability to master the intricacies of Subway or Elevated, a taxicab carried her to Park Row. It was only three dollars—whatever it should have been—very little, indeed, to pay as an initiation fee.

"A taxi!" the editor of the *Courier* remarked after her. Having a letter to him from a man he had long since forgotten—after the fashion of New York—she had not found him difficult of access. And he was the only editor in New York whose name—it was Kennard—was known to her. He had white hair, and the face of a young man who has known trouble. "Now, you don't want to come to work for us?" He seized a handful of damp page proofs from a boy, glanced at them with an air of hostility, and threw them to the floor in a crumpled mass, smiling at Hope before he had time to get his eyebrows disentangled from the frown of the moment before. It gave him a very curious expression—an expression of hopeless goodwill, she described it afterward. Perhaps because of the many hundreds of her he had seen before, and knew he would yet see. They fairly beat over him like a tide—the surge of youth against the rocks of experience. He always did what he could for them. "No," he said sadly, "you don't want to work for us. We can't afford taxi-cabs."

"Neither can I," she returned engagingly. "And I picked you out especially to work for; the taxi was simply a compliment."

"Umph!" He assaulted another bundle of proofs. "What can you do?"

Immediately, with the nervous deftness of a tyro prestidigitator, she unrolled beneath his nose a bundle of her choicest specimens. He seemed to be only pushing them aside; her heart went down and down, and jumped suddenly.

"I see," he said. "Come around next week; say Monday."

And she went out, propelled by the mere force of his will.

Evidently he meant all along to accept her services.

Or perhaps her sheer unspoken hopefulness decided him when she came again. In the meantime she had gone nowhere else, feeling as if it might cross her luck in her first attempt. At any rate, after a moment, when he appeared to be trying to remember where he had met her before, he abruptly swept her down the long city room and delivered her over, with an air of relief and the manner of one executing a writ of *habeas corpus*, to a sub-editor. The sub-editor, who was fat and worried-looking, in turn, after one harassed glance shooed her toward a thin, tired, sharply handsome woman of no particular age. This one sat before a typewriter in the attitude of one plucking out its vitals and flinging them in the face of a despised public.

"You'll work with Mrs. Garvice; she'll tell you what to do," said the fat sub-editor. "Come and see me about it later; we'll talk things over a bit. We're starting some new specials—women's dope."

Mrs. Garvice pushed a mass of fair hair from her brow, as if making room for a new impression to be devoted to Hope.

"How do you do? I'll be through with this in half an hour—mind waiting?" She fell on the typewriter again.

One or two reporters glanced at Hope casually, and looked away again. Hope knew and liked the atmosphere of a newspaper office; it suited her temperament; nowhere else in the world do men and women work together with such brusque friendliness, so little consciousness of sex; it is a workshop above everything, and those in it like their work or they would not be there. But for that very reason it is no place to look for personal companionship. Waiting, Hope wondered where then she might look. Not in a boarding-house; that she had never been able to endure. She stayed on at the hotel tentatively.

It did not seem possible to make friends with Mrs. Garvice, who was not unfriendly, but gave the impression of having her life already crowded beyond reason. In a week, two weeks, Hope knew her no better, though they went for material together almost every day, getting impressions of "prominent women," or women who would be prominent for at least a day when they were dished up to the public fancy.

Two weeks can be a very long time on a desert island, or worse, in a strange city. When Hope met Evelyn Curtis, she saw her with an eye sharpened by loneliness; here was another like herself. She was interviewing a wealthy woman who kept a *crèche* for a whim; she had been shown into a long, rather dark, luxurious drawing-room—to her mild surprise, on the second floor—of a brown stone house, one of forty exactly alike in a semi-fashionable street off Fifth Avenue. Hope remembered it very vaguely afterward; she had had so many new impressions, but even before she looked comprehendingly at her hostess she exchanged a quick glance of greeting with the thin, dark girl, who sat awkwardly, as if fearful of the unaccustomed softness, in a squat and puffy boudoir lounge.

Evelyn Curtis was very plain; her lack of beauty was positive; and her too bright black eyes admitted that she knew it thoroughly. There was infinite pathos in her smile, for it made her less lovely than before; she had no bloom; she looked as if she had never bloomed. She looked starved, body and soul; her mouth was not red, and her long black hair was lustreless. Only her eyes were terribly alive.

The two, strangers in every formal sense, looked at each other with sympathetic understanding, and felt that the woman they had both come to see was rather an interruption.

"She looked *stodged*," said Hope to Miss Curtis, after they had escaped from the house together. "Her very voice was overfed and massaged. What a lot of New York women look like that!" She had seized the other's arm, as they went down the brown stone steps together, disdaining conventional advances.

"You haven't been here long, have you?" said Miss Curtis, smiling her ugly, pathetically appealing smile.

"No. Have you? How did you guess it?"

"You have a different accent. You're on the *Courier*?"

"Yes. What are you with? Do you have to rush right down to the office? Won't you stop and have supper with me? I haven't eaten with a soul since I came to New York. Do, do come. Do you notice that people here don't ask you to eat? They ask you to have a drink. I almost felt insulted, at first. But I'll buy you a drink, if you like. Come to my hotel—it isn't far—and have supper in my room."

"Thank you," said Miss Curtis, obviously surprised, and perhaps a little grateful. "I'm free lancing; I don't have to rush off anywhere. Do you live here? You must be a millionaire." They were approaching the hotel.

"Indeed I'm not. It's astonishingly cheap here, but of course I must move. Tell me where I ought to look for a room. I haven't the least idea. Where do you live?"

"You wouldn't care for it," said Miss Curtis. "I pay two dollars a week for my room, downtown. I have no heat, and the window looks on a blank wall."

"Ugh!" Hope shivered frankly, and unlocked her door. Her own room looked very comfortable, after that. "I can't stand cold—I've had too much of it. Wait till I tell them to send up food." She telephoned and resumed the conversation. "I suppose you live in

Bohemia. I'm not Bohemian; I'm bourgeois to my marrow."

"No," said Miss Curtis simply, "I'm not Bohemian; I'm just poor," and she smiled again. "Newspapers are useful to keep off the cold; I wear them under my blouse." She put her hand to her meagre breast, and Hope heard a slight rustling to the pressure.

"But—but—oh, no," she stammered. "Not really! I've been poor, too, but——"

"Ah, well, I'm one of the unsuccessful ones. But I'd rather starve here than go back; I used to be a school-teacher," she said.

"But so was I, in a way; it wasn't as bad as that," protested Hope.

She did not quite realise that she was, after all, one of the capable ones, born to survive, intellectually independent, but economically adaptable, ready to use either her head or her hands, and to make the best of what she had, no matter how much she might protest and demand more. She was romantic, indeed; but Evelyn Curtis was a visionary. The story of her life, as she told it in a dozen sentences, was a better thing than she would ever write; it touched the deeps of simple tragedy. Materially she had been very comfortable as a school-teacher, but the mental drudgery of it had grown more than she could bear; and the Philistinism of her native city was equally intolerable. She loved books, and failed to grasp the fact that an appreciation of literature by no means predicates an ability to write.

In fact, she could not write. Authors were her demi-gods; she was a hero-worshipper.

So, with all her savings in hand, Evelyn had set out on a pilgrimage. She had sat at the feet of most of the prominent living authors, but even that failed to cure her. And, after travelling all over the Old World as

cheaply as possible, she had come back content in her own way and hungry in the natural order of things.

Now, Hope was an iconoclast, born without reverence or fear, and with the knowledge, despite her one considerable folly, that man that is born of woman is small potatoes and few in a hill, in the words of some anonymous wit she had once read.

"My goodness," she said, overcome when the recital closed, "what does anyone want to meet an author for? Or a painter, either, or any famous person? You've got all the best of them in whatever they create. I'd as soon want to meet the cook because I liked the meal. This is rather good cold beef, isn't it? Of course the cook might be interesting——" Miss Curtis was laughing heartily, rather as if unused to the exercise. "But isn't it true?" insisted Hope. "The interesting people are quite often just interesting; more likely to be critical than creative. And I am fond of books, but I don't see what one can get out of them without actual experience as a key. Of course I understand you wanting to see the world. But you really went abroad to see certain people whose lives and gifts you envied? Wanted to stand around and live their lives with them, through them. It cannot be done."

"Perhaps," said Evelyn. "You are very clever and cruel. Why are you here?"

"To discipline my soul, I suppose," said Hope, grinning. "There must be some meaning in those queer old religious terms, don't you think? I could feel the dry rot creeping over me, doing the little easy things that were nearest. I came on instinct. Something in me was trying to turn over in its sleep—having a nightmare. Maybe there is something here for me. Do you get any meaning at all out of what I'm saying?" Evelyn nodded, her liquid, bright, over-intelli-

gent eyes answering. "If there isn't, I'll go on. I may stub my toe over it—the whatever-it-is—some day while I'm rushing madly along. Or I may never find it, but not because I didn't try. Or—*quien sabe?* —I've come to the end of my poor imagination."

"You are one of the interesting ones," said Evelyn musingly.

CHAPTER XIX

HOPE wrinkled her nose.

"That's what one says of a woman who is neither rich nor beautiful," she said. "But it's better than calling me clever. Thanks. But I warn you, to-morrow I may bore you to death. I do myself, quite often."

"No," insisted Evelyn, laughing, "you are. I can read other people's fortunes because I have none of my own. Now you, you'll marry again. I hope your husband is dead——" She paused, rather overcome by her *gaucherie*.

"So do I," said Hope piously, "but you're talking nonsense. Why should I marry again? Enough is sufficient, but too much is plenty. It sounds *posé*, but I am tired of men. I have met millions of them. Since I left home I have walked a long, long road, like a Devonshire lane, between solid hedges and banks of men. Making one's own living means entering a world of men. It was my sad mistake to take them seriously. Just as if I were a girl in her own home, where all the men I met were carefully sifted down to a sentimental residuum. But we others ought to be different. Since we've followed the men to their lairs, we ought to be good sports and let 'em alone. I intend to. I am an adventuress—no, I am not contradicting myself. I belong to the new order of honourable adventuresses. Unknown continents in life—Madam Columbus looking for the New World—— Gold, and treasure, and much fame, you know, like the Raleighs and the Drakes went

after, not a blackbirder out for slaves. There, I'm out of breath. But don't talk husbands to me; I intend to cultivate women only. Tell me, instead, that I am a great genius and will be hung by the Academy and bought by the Metropolitan Museum."

"Columbus was looking for the Indies," Evelyn reminded her. "But show me your work and I will prophesy."

Hope, with good-natured lamentations, dived head foremost into her trunk and emerged with a portfolio of remnants.

Evelyn pored over them attentively for a long time, and Hope suddenly, a little tired, took up a book and forgot about her. A quick exclamation roused her.

"What are these?" Evelyn was asking.

"Which?" Hope tumbled off the bed lazily and went to look. "Why, my Moon Babies; I had forgotten them. Mary Dark and I did them, like Alice in Wonderland, to amuse our landlady's kiddies. They're nothing. Throw them away—no, they were Mary's, too." She was suddenly homesick, and wondered when she should see Mary again.

"Let me have one story," said Evelyn, with a rather sly manner.

"Certainly; take what you like. Wait, that one's all torn; I'll make you a new heading." Hope took up her sketching block and busied herself for fifteen minutes. "There, these are your godchildren, specially made for you. They're so easy to do! I wish I could say the same of my other work." She yawned, looking suddenly older with the ashen tint of fatigue.

Evelyn rose, reluctant, and surveyed the room with a wistful air, as she buttoned her shabby jacket.

"You're tired"—apologetically—"I shouldn't have stayed so long."

"I wanted you," said Hope. "Don't mind my looks; that's New York. There's something about the air here—it's harsh, like hard water—makes my bones feel old. Will you dine with me to-morrow—no; the next day? To-morrow I have to go out to the races—fashions and society. But please come the next day."

She turned her head away suddenly, for there were tears in Evelyn's eyes. It made her feel rather ashamed that she should have thought herself so forlorn. After Evelyn had gone she examined her own case as disinterestedly as she could. After all, life had given her something, and if she had been able to keep but little, what did that matter? At the end, no one could keep anything, save memories. Perhaps even those went also, at the last. And hers were amusing memories, all save one or two that she resolutely excluded from the present company.

She had liked a number of people—unconsciously she counted her gains thus in reverse order—Agnes, and Evan Hardy, and Allen Kirby, and above all Mary and Lisbeth. And Edgerton, who had a place of his own in the gallery. The flattery of having deflected him from his orbit toward hers, he the fixed star and she the small stray comet, made his memory stick. And they had all liked her. And—now she went over carefully all that Mary had told her, and all that she had guessed, measuring facts against facts, her own deeds and misdeeds against the world's requirements, as they were being borne in upon her—she had undoubtedly upset and annoyed a great many worthy people she did not know and would not have liked if she had known. That was something. Sitting on the bed, with her knees hugged under her chin, she laughed in a queer, quiet, impish way, all to herself. If she had lived at all through that, with the odds so

heavily against her, might she not win the next time, by carefully ranging herself on the right side?

"It isn't the wicked that are punished; it's the fools." So she reflected. "Now, what do I want? And I will see what I must do to get it." And there she halted, her mirth slowly evaporating, leaving her very cold and heavy.

"I do not want anything," she said, and rolled her hair into a tight bun and kicked her clothes on to the floor and crept into bed.

That was the mood that had kept her prisoner within herself for nearly three years now; she had fled from it, and found it in her pack at the end of the journey. It disgusted her. There was something so slack, so puerile and whimpering about it. One imagined it as garbed in a kimono, with tousled hair. To fight it was the harder, because of her heavy handicap of physical listlessness; she felt half-ill. The price of her own silly moping, she knew; nights of black despair and self-indulgent tempers, meals foregone for sheer spiteful rage. She set her teeth to pay it, replacing zest with courage. If not gaily, then it must be done grimly. Not that she wanted to become a simpering and toothful optimist of the current brand, a creature exuding hollow mirth and sonorous, maddeningly inept platitudes. She only wanted to get outside herself, her own sorrow and humiliation; to regain the dignity of unselfconsciousness.

But she felt that, despite the most conscientious and unwilling care of her toilette, she looked thirty years old and hopeless of this life and the next, as she sat in the press-box at the races the next day. The reaction of having talked herself out with Evelyn left her without two words for anyone; she scowled at the ticket-taker, and was barely civil to a well-meaning reporter who found her a chair.

It was a gala day of some sort, perhaps the end of the season; there was a sprinkling of well-dressed women in the boxes, and gilded youths with sticks and *boutonnieres*. Watching the men, probably because her business was with the women, Hope wondered how on earth they managed to look as if all poured from the same mould: they had small heads, smooth, vacant faces, and slim waists, and their sticks were even as a Jew's phylacteries on a feast day, a something indispensable marking the chosen, of the nature of a religious observance. It was true, however, that she viewed these with a jaundiced, not to say bilious, eye; there were other men. Hope intolerantly longed to see just one with large red hands and a number eighteen collar, and found the hostlers singularly refreshing as they appeared occasionally at the paddock entrance, holding the heads of the dainty, high-mettled horses. The horses delighted her; they walked as if there were eggs in the path, and looked coquetishly out of their hoods, pretending to be about to bolt. The women in the boxes were groomed like the horses, but not half so pretty; they were not of the same clean hardness, but were flabby and their eyes were dull.

Hope knew she was rather outrageously dressed, in a light greenish heather tweed suit, with a white waistcoat and spats and a cloth hat, and she completed the ensemble by sticking a large single glass in her eye and surveying the whole scene with cold disdain. She had done it on purpose, having determined to "put up a front," and the eyeglass was a final personal insolence addressed to New York in general. It was useful, certainly, since she must sketch from a distance, but in Seattle she had found double eyeglasses quite sufficient. She took out her sketching block at last and began, rather savagely, on

the well-fed women, making their faces all alike, round and like a French doll, but paying the most careful attention to each detail of their clothes.

Norris Carter told her afterward it was her eyeglass drew his attention first; the sun glinted on it, and the sparkle struck in his face. Hope looked up and through him, with concentrated scorn, and fixed her rapt gaze on a woman in a purple hat and tangerine coloured coat, and then she bent to her pad again. The eyeglass infuriated Carter, as a woman's eccentricity does any man, because he knows he is too great a coward to dare so much himself in the face of his fellow men. He leaned against the railing and looked at her, getting a crick in his neck doing it, since the press-box is high.

"She looks dissipated," he pronounced, observing her pallor, but failing to note the faint hollow of her cheek, its concomitant. "Queer eyes. That green fades them, or something. Her eyelashes are black. I'm sure she drinks." Then he caught sight of her spats, as she shifted and crossed her feet. "I have really got to meet her and find out why she does it," he said, being thoroughly alive, and interested in almost anything. He was waiting for a reporter he knew. "She looks horribly bad-tempered," he concluded charitably. There was Ellerslie, the man he knew. He rushed forward and seized him.

"No, I don't know her," said Ellerslie, "but I'll find someone who does. Another, Nick? Gad, you're the limit." They climbed to the box.

But it seemed as if no one knew her. At last another reporter said he had met her once, but she did not seem to remember it, judging by her frosty look. Under repeated urgings, however, he went forward and recalled the incident to her.

"I think I do remember," she said, not so uncor-

dially as he had feared. "But you know I'm a perfect idiot about that sort of thing. My friends invariably throw a brick at me by way of salutation, to remind me of their existence and identity. I'm glad there is someone here I know. Isn't that blackpointed-bay a lovely thing? I've got ten dollars on him. Of course you may introduce someone. Howjedo, Mr. Bartett. Did you order a rainstorm? There's one coming. I hope my bay can swim." She continued gazing at the horses, and was not quite sure which of the several men at her elbow—they were crowded now, since some people have almost a mania for press-boxes—had been introduced.

There was a storm coming up. Carter disclaimed any responsibility, and tried to tell her his real name. She called him Cartwright, and he began to feel deeply exasperated. Later, as the last race was ending and they were making their way gingerly across the muddy "lawn" toward the exit and the cars, she piled on the last straw. He had implored her to wait for an umbrella, or whatever protection he might be able to conjure up.

"Thanks, but don't trouble," she said. "I daresay I'm more used to this sort of thing than you."

He wanted to box her ears. Did he look like a man of sugar, or as if he feared the weather? All she had in mind was that it rained seven months of the year in Seattle; but he could not know that.

"Why," he began in an aggrieved tone, "I've lived half my life out of doors. I——"

Now what had she done? She knew that tone, from long habit of stepping on people's toes un-awares. How had she insulted this—she took her first real look at him—very agreeable young man?

A very comely young man, too—was it possible? He had strong-looking hands, tanned beyond fash-

ionable requirements; he had no stick; he had a fresh brown face with wide-open blue eyes—and where had she seen such yellow hair on any man? It was unusual, but familiar.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked abruptly, voicing her thoughts so neatly that she started.

"Could you ever forget me?" she asked gravely, keeping her eyes down.

"Not now," he countered readily:

"Oh, piffle!" was her mental comment. "Served me right." And she did not answer, not knowing what to say. They splashed along silently.

"You look tired," he ventured at last.

"Do I?" with marked indifference. "It's this green suit; makes me look yellow. I fancy you mean cross, though. I lost twenty dollars on those deceitful horses; can you blame me? Look at my lovely white spatterdashes—nice name, they look it now." The mud was creeping up them in streaks and spots; they were a deplorable sight. "All the money I had in the world," she went on dreamily.

Somehow that remark gave him a dreadful pang—to think of her losing all she had in the world. All she was thinking was that it meant she simply must, now, find a cheaper room somewhere, for this extravagance of betting, on top of her previous extravagance of clothes, had taken almost all her reserve fund.

But he could only express his anxiety indirectly, and returned to the weather.

"You're getting soaked," he declared almost angrily.

"I like it, honestly," she said. "Like rain, and the feel of rough weather if it isn't too cold; I like even this mud, after the New York pavements. You know, those millions of miles of streets, and even the parks paved and railed off, make you feel as if

you'd never get your feet on the earth again. People in New York don't, do they? I get home-sick for the wilderness sometimes; I don't want it always, but a touch of it is so sane."

She was surprised that she had found so much to say, and still more at his quick enthusiasm. He asked her if she did not love the Adirondacks, and she confessed they were no more than a name to her.

"I come from a very far country," she said, and named it vaguely as "the Northwest."

"Where?" he asked. "I travelled through there once, more than ten years ago."

"No; did you?" She turned and looked at him hard. Now she knew she had seen him before; the picture rose in her mind vividly. Would it for him? No, that was not possible; he had merely fallen back on a *cliché* when he had said that. To punish him she was silent on what was going through her mind; it was more amusing not to tell him, and she remained purposely vague to his repeated "Where?"

"All over," she said. "I cannot stay anywhere. By and by I shall fly away from New York. There is my car. Thank you."

"Where do you live in New York?" He tried to make the question casual as he helped her aboard; duty compelled him to rejoin the party he had come with, though they might have gone by now.

She told him the name of her hotel, and maliciously refrained from adding that she would undoubtedly leave within a day or two. He would forget it anyway; people did forget, in New York. And he did not write it down, so she felt more certain.

He did not in the least need to write it down.

CHAPTER XX

WATCHING him unobserved from the corners of her long light grey eyes, Mrs. Sturtevant felt certain that Norris had something on his mind. Being a woman, she felt equally certain it was another woman. It was not intuition so much as the mere vanity from which neither sex is exempt, a vanity of sex itself, told her so; but it was truth none the less. They were in Mrs. Sturtevant's own drawing-room, a very delightful room, full of sunlight and graceful Colonial furniture and masses of pale flowers. Norris was there very frequently, as a cousin may be without examining his conscience on the matter, even if only a second cousin.

The drawing-room suited Grace Sturtevant perfectly. She knew that, and had once, in a moment of studied cynicism, told a friend that she had been obliged to eliminate her husband—by way of the divorce court—because he simply did not match either of them. He was a large, ruddy, full-blooded creature, or had been when she saw him last, some years before. What he was now she neither knew nor cared; though, to do her justice, she had once cared very deeply.

She was tall, almost taller than her cousin, and looked as like him, as one so different could. But the likeness was fined down, attenuated, as in a half-tone copy of an oil painting. She was slim, and very white; her complexion endured with credit the proximity of the white and pale pink blossoms she loved; her hands and feet were long and narrow, what is

called patrician, and her straight, silky hair of an ash-blond tint. "*Distinguée*," her friends called her; she did not object to the adjective.

"Do sit down, Nick," she said at last. Her voice was cultivated, clear, passionless; it seemed to express her perfectly—and did not. "Spare my carpet," she added lightly. "I cannot afford a new one. Are you in love or in debt? You have all the symptoms."

"Neither, thanks," he said, slowly.

For one fleeting moment he was inclined to confide in her; it was no particular distrust of her stayed his tongue, but rather a shamefaced thought that the whole matter was so trivial as to border on the absurd. The fact was that had he belonged to the species for which such naïve volumes are compiled, he would have been resorting to a "Guide to Manners" on "How a Young Gentleman Should Pay His First Addresses to a Young Lady He Respectfully Admires." He wanted, in brief, to call on Mrs. Angell—he did not know her name was Hope and frankly wondered what it might be.

Now he had never before found it a difficult matter to call upon any woman, and that alone upset him seriously. Perhaps it was because of her maltreatment of his name; possibly he feared she would call him Mr. Cartwright again, or even be unable to get so near as that to fixing his identity. It would be quite horrible to have to account for himself in detail and give a reason for his mere existence while attempting at the same time to explain why he was there giving such a reason. The matter at that point became too complicated to be pursued further, but it seemed to have endless possibilities and ramifications. Nor was it simplified by the fact that he had already been to her hotel and discovered her absent; and the knowledge of having bribed the desk clerk

with a cigar to ask the porter whither her trunk had been conveyed—she had said she would call for letters; if any came—weighed on him like a secret crime.

But, having gone so far, he felt bound in honour to himself to reach a conclusion—and the lady of his quest. He had got her telephone number, too; at least, that of her landlady. It was a real problem to him whether he should telephone her, or go in person. Actually, he had twice removed the telephone from its hook intending to take the first alternative, and backed down ignominiously, and the remembrance of that made him rise and walk across the room each time it came to his mind, which was every five minutes or so. He wondered feebly if his brain might be giving way.

Hang it all, she would hardly *bite* him! She was only about as big as a minute and also, he reflected with a certain malignant satisfaction, she wasn't a bit pretty. He repeated that to himself several times. No, she looked washed-out, and her profile was smudgy; and he distinctly recalled crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes.

"No, I just feel restless. Sick of town. If I could get away I think I'd go up to the North Woods for a month; I'd like to sniff a camp-fire again, and sleep under the stars." Hope had talked about the wilderness.

"My dear Nicko," said Mrs. Sturtevant, with provoking calm, "you came back from the Adirondacks just ten days ago, didn't you? Think up a better one. Or why not tell the truth?"

"Oh, Grace," he said, with a rather rueful laugh, "call off your bear. You always make me feel as if I'd been up to something positively criminal. I can't help it if I'm a wild ass in the desert. I guess I'll beat it down town; I ought to be there anyway. Busi-

ness," he added, with that firm vagueness a man always employs when using that magic word, twin sister to charity in its powers of benevolent concealment.

"If you'd only grow up," sighed Mrs. Sturtevant, and came to him, laying her long white fingers on his sleeve.

A faint glow, a warmth, came into her cool eyes; and a veiled impatience. Ah, if he would! She had waited so long, years, for him to grow up; and he was still the boy she had played with when she was in pigtails and he in knickers. She had grown up, though she was one of those fine-grained, poised creatures who awaken slowly. Marriage had been her hothouse, but when she had come to maturity there was nothing one-sided about it; her excellent brain was equal to her well-conserved emotional nature. And now, sometimes Nick made her feel not only mature but old! Why, why did he remain so maddeningly the same, when all else in her apparently solid world had changed so incredibly? There were times when she very primitively longed to slap him, as an exasperated tutor might an inattentive pupil.

"Oh, now, Gracie," he began deprecatingly, his eyes twinkling. "What do you want—grey hair, or to see me tottering around on crutches?"

What did she want? Her hand dropped; she turned away, her movements gracefully deliberate, and went to the window, a curiously general trick of anyone who has need of concealment.

"You are a fool, Nick," she said sharply, "but not so much as that. I made the mistake of being really interested in—in your welfare; you will pardon me. If you do not care, there is no reason why I should."

Sometimes he thought Grace was growing a bit shrewish, she disapproved of him so often and so candidly. But he was used to it; he put it down to

her one great disappointment—the one of which he knew. Women, anyway, he thought, were rather inclined to worry a chap. They were always scolding him, at least, and it was not that he was ever anything but nice to them. And good old Grace was really fond of him, he felt sure; comfortably sure, just as he was of his own fondness for her.

"I'm getting on your nerves," he remarked resignedly. "I'm off."

"Nonsense," she said brusquely. "Aren't you going to stay and see the babies? Maddie will absolutely howl the roof down if she finds you've been here and gone."

"All right, if you can stand me a little longer." She smiled at that; he put his hat down. "They ought to be back soon." Madeline was an imp and a darling, and he was more than fond of her. That she reciprocated with enthusiasm was evident when a moment later her nurse brought her in, bright-eyed and rosy, with flying curls, fresh from a walk.

"Oh, Micky," she screamed in a delighted treble, hurling herself at his legs, "tackling low," as he put it. "Here is me. What've you done for me?"

"Little pig," he said, tossing her to his shoulder. "Got a kiss—tied with a pink ribbon. Hello, sonny; how's tricks?"

Grace's boy, who was two years older than Madeline, came forward more gravely, but even so rather boisterously. They swarmed over him, ruffling his hair, going through his pockets, and getting their hands gently slapped for it, whereat Madeline pouted and looked at him with a roguish side-glance. Mrs. Sturtevant, watching him carry Madeline on one strong arm to a sofa, was silent, her face singularly immobile. She had always been a trifle afraid to

classify her emotions when she saw him with her children—another man's children—in his arms.

"You spoil them, Nick," she said at last, still a little sharply.

"Get out! I spank them more than you do," he retorted, with some truth. "You spoil 'em; you simply send them out of your sight when they misbehave, and then they go on misbehaving where you can't see them. Maddie, isn't your mummy a naughty girl?"

"I *love* my mummy," said Madeline, with sudden grave loyalty. "I am a naughty girl. Yesterday, I stealed a little cake." She looked so pensively proud of her own wickedness that even Mrs. Sturtevant laughed.

"Then," said Carter, "I shall have to bring you a little cake, so you won't need to steal one. Now I must go." Madeline threatened tears, but was pacified with promises of an early return.

"You won't stay to dinner?" said Mrs. Sturtevant.

"I've an engagement for dinner," answered Carter, and hoped that later that might happen to be true.

Mrs. Sturtevant shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Very well. Au 'voir."

He was gone. Maddie came and climbed up on her lap, unnoticed, and presently put her arms about her mother's neck.

"Mummy sick?" she asked sorrowfully.

Mrs. Sturtevant started.

"Yes, dear," she said, as if with an effort. "Mummy's head aches. Run away to nursie."

So, left quite alone, she sat very straight and still, trying to question herself closely, looking at her own heart, out of a certain natural pride in her honesty with herself. How long had she cared for Nick like this? But she could not positively remember; not

even when she had been aware of it first, for it seemed to her now that she must have cared for him longer than she had known. Having always schooled herself to exquisite restraint, kept her emotions far below the surface, such unawareness had not been difficult. It was a family tradition with her people, the Camberwells, to be "sensible." And another family tradition, that of loyalty, unconsciously translated by Grace into a feeling of personal ownership, had helped to blind her. Jealousy had been needed to bring the truth home to her. Once he had been reported engaged to another woman, a false report, but before she knew it false she had hated that other woman utterly. And then she knew, though very slowly had she acknowledged it.

But he would never know. Unless he sought the knowledge. She set her teeth on that; pretty, rather sharp-looking, small teeth.

There was something hopeless about not even being able to remember when it had begun. It made the end look equally uncertain.

She went to the old, dim gilt-framed mirror at the far end of the drawing-room, and studied herself for a long time, and turned away with a bitter pride in the fact that nothing in her face betrayed her. And a wistful wonder—was that face not fair? Other men had thought so. There is no woman who is not beautiful to her own eyes in the light of the one man's praise; nor one who is not despoiled of all the usufruct of beauty if he prove blind.

In the meantime her cousin was ringing Hope's door-bell—or at least her landlady's door-bell—in a pitiable state of incertitude as to what he should say if he found Hope at home. By the time the door opened he quite hoped she would not be at home.

CHAPTER XXI

SHE was at home, taking down her hair—it was a fancy of hers that she could think better with her hair in a braid—and speculating on the vanity of life. New York she thought was worse than a merry-go-round, in which no one could stop a moment without losing his mount and falling out of the procession. And the procession apparently went in a circle. In a month she had not made even one acquaintance, except Evelyn Curtis, and Evelyn Curtis had gone home to Kansas City or Indianapolis or wherever it was, to stay probably the rest of the winter.

In short, Hope was lonely, and there was no companionship in sight unless she talked to Mrs. Hassard, her new landlady; and Hope had always said she could bore herself much better than anyone else could. Mrs. Hassard, like every other New York landlady, had seen better days—so had Hope, as it was raining vilely—and was not reticent about the fact. Fortunately, Hope had some work to do. She was rather troubled about her work, and unsure whether she was living up to her editor's hopes, if he had ever cherished any. Her drawings were neither silly enough nor good enough, she felt in the depths of her candid soul.

It would be nice to have someone to talk to. Evidently Mrs. Hassard had; Hope heard the bell ring, and then voices in the passage, approaching her door.

"I'm sure she's in," Mrs. Hassard was saying, "and it will be nice for her to have company; but wait and

I'll see if she's going out again." The door, which was not latched, swung open. "Oh, Mrs. Angell, there's a gentleman to see you."

"Why, I—I haven't——" any place to see him, she was about to say, and then observed the gentleman himself, having got his wish, looking at her appealingly over Mrs. Hassard's shoulder.

"You're not going out, are you?" that lady inquired.

"How do you do, Mr. Carter? No, I'm not going out——"

Then it was too late to make any further protest; Mrs. Hassard shooed him into the room and departed, smiling and a trifle fluttered. It subtly flatters any woman's vanity, somehow, to see a man suing for the favour of even another woman. Besides, people usually did smile at Norris Carter.

"How do you do?" said Hope again, and offered him a handful of hairpins. "Will you sit down? I—really, I didn't know I could have anyone here; but I suppose in New York you can do anything. I have seen landladies who would curl up and die at the idea——" then it occurred to her that she might be making him feel an intruder, and added, with a spontaneous laugh, "but I am excessively glad to see you, and how on earth did you find me?"

"I tracked you by your footprints," he told her, and looked around the room with an odd, quick glance. He was looking for signs of a husband! "Mrs. Angell, have you had dinner?"

"I had tea," she said, sitting down and jabbing the hairpins into her hastily coiled tresses at random. With amazement Carter noticed that she did not look in the mirror. "So it is all right; you are not *de trop*. Usually I dine late, at that white marble palace of Mr. Childs's across the street. We can talk awhile;

I am bursting with conversation. I have a month of it bottled up in me. Put on your life preserver."

"Put on your hat instead," he returned, her chatter having restored him to his native well-bred audacity, "and we will go out and find some place, perhaps not so palatial, but quieter than Mr. Childs's. I came to take you to dinner."

"It is not possible," she gasped, in mock astonishment. "People do everything else in New York; they give you cocktails and good advice and theatre tickets, but they do not eat. I—I—wait one moment; I'm afraid you'll get away." She seized her hat and put it on with burlesqued haste. Then she smiled at him rather coaxingly, and took it off again. "Mayn't we talk a little while first?" she asked. "Are you *very* hungry?"

What could he answer to that? It was half-past nine when they finally went to dinner, and much too late to go to a theatre afterwards, as he had planned.

"Would you believe it," she said, leaning across the small table to make her voice heard above the din of the orchestra, "this is the first time I've been in one of these far-famed gilded caravansaries? If this is a sample, I believe they're overrated. I can't think here, can you?"

"People don't come here to think," he assured her. "But haven't you really seen anything of New York?"

"Not if this is New York," she said. He felt quite unreasonably glad. "I've seen the Metropolitan Museum," she added in extenuation. "And—and—the Elevated! I have a lovely view of it from my window. And—there was something else I saw, but I forget what. Probably Central Park."

"Haven't you any friends here?"

"Not a friend," she said calmly, spearing a small oyster with a tiny silver fork and looking at it du-

biously. Being an inlander, she was not thoroughly acclimated to oysters, but he had ordered them, and she felt obliged to eat them.

"And your husband isn't here either?" He felt rude and presumptuous, but he wanted to know.

"I have no husband," she said deliberately. And ate the oyster.

Three years before she had closed her mind and her lips upon that subject, and she saw no reason for rescinding her resolution now. She hated women who paraded their woes, anyway.

"Mrs. Angell," said Carter slowly, "will you let me be your friend?"

"By all means," she said amiably, with a smiling lift of her brows. "Why not?" Could one say less to a young man whose dinner one was even at the moment consuming?

"No, but truly," he persisted, "I do want to be your friend. Won't you think of me as one?"

But he was in earnest! She looked at him with undisguised astonishment, and yet recollected it was thus almost all her friendships had begun, suddenly. Only no one else had ever been so insistent about the definition of his status. Unless Edgerton, who had wanted to help her, at once. Her heart felt warm at the recollection, and at this young man's candid haste. But she said thoughtfully:

"One doesn't have many friends, you know. I should think six a liberal allowance for life. And you don't know anything about me." It did not occur to her that she knew less of him. "But if you wish to try, I am sure it would be very nice—for me." She smiled at him, thinking him rather naïve, but liking him none the less for it.

Once when she was about eighteen, and still a pupil at Normal School, she had for a brief while known a

boy, little more than her own age, a real boy, just blundering into manhood, full of the high and hopeless and perhaps rather foolish ideals that rightly belong to that troublous time; and he and she had talked of friendship, feeling themselves immensely original and treating the subject with a kind of tremulous solemnity which they felt due to themselves as pioneers in a new and vast field. He had been a more than usually handsome youth—Hope had the healthiest of pagan instincts in that respect—and she was sorry when he went away to an Eastern college and their lives permanently divided. Sometimes since she laughed over it all, but she liked it, too, as a memory. It had been very brief, and perhaps the better for that.

She wondered how old Carter might be. Twenty-nine, she guessed. He was thirty-two. But the sheen of his thick yellow hair—close cropped as it was—the clearness of his wide-open blue eyes and brown skin, still a shade darker than his hair, and the cleft in his chin that was hardly more than a dimple, took from his years deceptively. A touch of cynicism crept into her thoughts. Did he really believe himself?

Then she thought of what she had said to Mary, about no longer casting nets for love, and wondered if she had spoken more truly than she knew. It might be possible—all sorts of things were possible, to which her life stood witness. And it was less trouble to believe than not, since it could not matter to her if he lied. What object could he have? She shrugged her shoulders. Amusement, perhaps—but she needed amusement too.

Thought runs quickly; all that had come and gone while he was saying, still seriously:

"Thank you."

"Don't," she said, shaking her head, "you will find

I give nothing for nothing. I am warning you, I will get the best of the bargain."

"And I should like to show you New York," he went on.

"You prove my contention," she smiled. "I should like that very much. But not any more to-night; I have some work to do."

So she went straight home, and insisted on walking, though the pavements were still glistening with rain. Carter could see that her thin slippers were soaked, and when she coughed slightly he almost remonstrated angrily.

"Oh, pshaw," she said, "I've been wet for the last three years, and I promise I'll change as soon as I get in. Will that do you?"

He had to agree to it. But when she was in her own room she sat for several minutes thinking about him conscientiously. She had purposely not told him of meeting him before; it still seemed amusing to have that in reserve. A sudden chill roused her out of her abstraction; she got hastily into a dressing-gown and drew her chair to the light and fell to work. And her dreams were not of him, nor of any young man.

Yet it did not seem to surprise her particularly when he came again the next night, and many nights thereafter. It was rather comfortable to see him sitting there in that atrocious mahogany rocking-chair, with the light focussing on his head and his eager gaze seeking hers so frankly. She was a social creature, if not strictly gregarious; and then, too, he so obviously exerted himself to interest her—not a common habit of young men as she knew them—and he looked so thoroughly alive, and he looked happy! She owned to being tired herself; a lassitude was creeping into her veins, and his vitality stimulated her.

Or, if he did not come in the evening, it might be

because he had already found some place she must see that afternoon. As a cicerone she found him indefatigable, and whatever was unusual in New York he knew. Old bits of it, forgotten corners, and such historic landmarks as still retain more than a name; and then those exotic sections where the Old World or the Orient has been transplanted bodily. She liked Fraunces Tavern better than Rector's, and the sight of Betty Jumel's andirons standing before Betty's cold hearth was almost as good, after a tiring morning, as the sight of her own fender. And a cup of tea at Yen Mok's drunk out of thin cups without handles, with neither sugar nor milk, had all the East in it, and her own lazy days in Seattle, watching the blue Pacific. She could never have enjoyed the city so well without his eyes to see it through.

But when he still talked of friendship, her first rather cheerful cynicism faded to genuine perplexity and then turned and rent her as a hypocrite. He was in earnest. After he had told her as much about himself as she invited, and included an account of Grace Sturtevant in the recital, he dispersed her doubts with one simple remark.

"I want you to meet Grace," he said. "She's the nearest to a sister I've got; and she can't help but like you. She's clever, too; you two ought to get on famously. It must be lonesome for you here without any women friends."

How long had she known him? Less than a month, at any rate; but a desert island could not have furthered the acquaintance more than her solitary existence.

"That is very kind of you," she murmured. "More than kind. Of course I should be pleased to meet your cousin. You really are good to put yourself out."

"I'm not putting myself out," he said almost im-

patiently. "I like you more than any woman I've met in years. I said I'd try to be your friend, if you'd let me." Impulsively he leaned over and took her hand.

She looked at him and smiled. In the circumstances that might have meant almost anything. It might have meant an invitation. But he dropped her hand as if it burned him, and a dark red tide flowed up to the very edge of his bright hair.

"Friends?" she said gently.

"I—I beg your pardon. I meant what I said—and I wasn't thinking——"

"Never mind," she said, the smile deepening into a laugh. "Your risk, you know."

"Yes," he said doggedly, "I do know just what you mean. And you're wrong. I am your friend. And I never loved any woman in my life, and I never expect to. It looks like rot to me—all that sort of thing, and marrying."

"How sensible you are," she said enigmatically, veiling the mischievous spark in her eyes. "I don't see how you knew without trying it. We won't quarrel about it, anyway. Really, really," she laughed again, full-throated, "I assure you nothing could induce me to marry you. I am much more 'sot' against-it than you. I have the best of reasons." She went off into a burst of merriment that lasted minutes and made her wipe her eyes before she could fairly see him again.

"Oh, go on," he said, putting his hands in his pockets, still rather ruddier than need be, but smiling perforce. "I let myself in for it, all right. Rub it in. But you know perfectly well what I meant. I just didn't want you to imagine I meant to bother you—to be an ass, that way. Just because I like you—and I——"

"Have a few bad habits," she said. "No, really, it is quite all right. I promise, I will never even hint at

marrying you." And then they both shouted with laughter.

It was only after he had gone she began to feel like a hypocrite. "He *does* believe himself," she thought, with unspeakable amazement. "And I really am not even his friend. If he never came again, I wouldn't miss him for more than twenty-four hours—well, a week, if no one else came."

"I wasn't thinking," he had said, with a great deal more truth than he dreamed.

And then, at this point in her reflections, Hope pulled off her shoes and threw them across the room with violence, as a slight expression of disgust at herself. Was it possible that she was again flattering herself with that old puerile nonsense about her own importance, and the importance of a moment's fancy of a man for the chance woman? Hadn't she had one quite thorough lesson on that subject? What if he did dig a pit for himself and fall into it? Let him climb out again. It was his own business. "Men had died from time to time, and worms had eaten them, but not for love." What appeared to her as her own monumental conceit toppled and fell on her and she lay meekly prostrate under the ruins.

And, when he did not come the next day, though he had come every day for a week, she made no attempt to extricate herself from that humble position.

But as the rain had stopped, making way for a stretch of glorious Indian summer, and her cough continued, she decided she would go out of town for a day, or over the week end, and look at the sea again, her old medicine of the soul. Mrs. Hassard told her of some hotel with an unpronounceable name in some unget-at-able corner of Staten Island, which she was assured would be at once cheap and quiet now, since the summer was over. She went in search of it.

CHAPTER XXII

L YING full length on the sun-browned, soft grass, among dead soft yellow leaves and flowers contentedly gone to seed, steeped in sun and a happy sense of general uselessness, Hope surveyed the horizon and completed her delight by assuring herself that there was not a soul in sight. If she stood up, she could see the hotel she had just left, but she did not want to stand up, and she had a positive desire not to see the hotel. It was undoubtedly a useful place to leave a suit-case, but little else could be said for it. She had taken but one full breath of its desolation and fled, hours before. A summer hotel when the season is ended, and in mid-week at that, when there is small chance of even the last leaf fluttering in disconsolately, is not a place of cheer.

Before her stretched the sea, with lazy six-inch swells creaming up on a beach of spotless, delicate sand. The Atlantic beaches filled Hope with joy; she had not quite imagined them, after the harsher West Coast fringes. There was a touch of exquisiteness about that white, fine path between sea and shore, as if God had made it with care and pleasure. At her back was but the edge of the down and the sky, and she insisted to her drowsily active imagination that the world ended there. Perhaps someone to help her insist would have been agreeable, but that could be dispensed with. Romance dies hard, she reflected, and smiled, and would have slept, perhaps. But the grass, which had not even been whispering to a breeze, swished and crackled softly; and Hope sat up and



looked over her shoulder, ready for annoyed flight. Instead, she sat still, and said:

"Is it you?"

Norris Carter tried to look surprised. He was not a good actor, but he had an uncritical audience.

"Mrs. Angell!" he cried.

"Exactly," she nodded. "Did I follow you here?"

There are disadvantages about being a fair man. But Hope did not notice his colour.

"You couldn't have," he said. "I just happened here; I was over in the next town on business. When did you arrive?"

"When the sun was over there. There is no time here; at least, my watch stopped as soon as I got here."

"Do you mind if I sit down?" He suited the action to the word.

"Not at all. I think I must have wished you up out of nowhere—there was a djinn in a bottle, wasn't there? Perhaps you saw him. We are fated to meet, aren't we?"

"I know I asked you several times before," he said, comfortably rolling a cigarette and unspeakably relieved to find she took his presence so casually, "but haven't we met somewhere, ages ago?"

"Where should you say?"

"I will not quote Henley," he said firmly. "But he may have been right, at that. Because I can't remember where, and I know I have."

"You couldn't possibly remember," she assured him gravely. "I was too young—no, that's not a joke. We did meet."

"Where?" he demanded, almost excitedly.

"You wore a brown Norfolk suit," she went on calmly, "and a green tie with a scarab pin. I didn't know it was a scarab then, and I thought it was rather horrid of you to wear a beetle on your tie. Had you

just been to Egypt? You had been growing a moustache, and you'd just shaved it off; your upper lip showed it. I had my hair in curls, and it probably needed combing. I had no shoes. So you wouldn't speak to me, because you were a great big man, and I was a mere, a very mere child. Now do you remember?"

"I *was* in Egypt, twelve years ago I think; I came back by the Pacific route——"

"I think you were on a hunting trip," she added, watching him with a smile. "And you stayed at my father's house, with two other men. One of them was then the sixth vice president of the C. P. R." "

"We stopped—there was a girl there," he said slowly. "But she was grown up; it wasn't you."

"My oldest sister," said Hope, laughing. "We look a bit alike, but we aren't. She is a respectable married woman, and I am a gipsy. Don't you remember me at all?" She looked mockingly mournful. "A little, scared, homely girl in a corner."

"There was a little girl," he said. "It was you!" This as if some rare phenomenon had been presented to him.

"Kittens make cats; little girls grow up," she nodded. "It is me."

"Good Lord!" he remarked, seemingly overcome.

"Oh, now, it isn't serious," she assured him. "Where are you stopping? Oh, that's where my worldly belongings are checked. But I'm really going to stay out here on the beach."

"Then I'll have to stay out too," he declared, "and chase away the lions and crabs *à la* Newburg, and things." They laughed as if he had said something witty. "Won't you tell me the rest now?" he asked. "If you were there, why are you here? It's a long way."

"For a little girl with no shoes," she added. He really had been thinking something like that. "All right, if you will tell me about when you were a conquering young hero with a moustache. What do you want to know first?"

"What's your little name?" he demanded.

"It is a little name," she owned. "My name is Hope."

"Hope?" he said, as if expecting her to continue.

"That's all," she said sadly. "Just Hope. It stopped growing when very young. I think I should have been called Despair. That's very subtle of me, isn't it?"

"My name's Norris, you know," he said, "but everyone calls me Nick. That's very subtle too—if your last name's Carter."

"I love silly people," she said solemnly, and they laughed again. "Let's be perfectly silly all afternoon."

They had a whole world to themselves wherein to be as foolish as they chose; and the mere space and sun were enough to raise the spirits of two reasonably healthy young animals to the bubbling point. They rescued old memories from the limbo of forgotten things and told absurd tales of their childhood and adolescence.

"My father is really to blame for my being here," she said, when he later harked back to his question. "He went as far as he could in one direction, and I am only exploring the back trail. I couldn't help it; we have to go and go—the Fieldings. He pursued the wilderness, and I am investigating civilisation. It's wearing work sometimes, and this," she looked about her, "is a relief. The wilderness is gone, so I come down to the sea; the sea doesn't change. Tell me, do you often have such wonderful days as this at this time of year? Is this actually October?" The air

was almost languidly warm; it was a rarely perfect day. "I should like to go in swimming," she said idly, and then sat up, the light of daring kindling in her eye. "I *will* go in swimming," she declared. "I have my bathing suit with me."

"The water is cold, really it is," he said. She cast a mildly scornful eye on him; he thought of her previous aspersions concerning his fear of the weather, and capitulated without another word. "I will borrow a bathing suit," he said.

The hotelkeeper looked at him with tolerant contempt, but produced the article; they retained their coats, and went back to the beach.

The water was cold, but intensely invigorating. Hope was not a strong swimmer, but she liked the green depths, the little sparkling waves, the buoyant, yielding, enfolding embrace of the salt water, and struck out steadily seaward, swimming slowly, her wet face upturned to the sun. He stayed at her elbow, with some difficulty restraining his stroke; he swam like a seal. His damp yellow hair glistened, like a lost treasure; she saw that his arms and neck were as tanned as his face; and the gleam of his blue eyes between his spray-beaded lashes was like a reflection of the sky. *Æsthë*tically, she admitted, he was very satisfactory; not like some of the poor things she had seen on the beaches, who looked wilted and bleached and miserably exposed, like ill-grown celery untimely brought to the light of day.

She was breathing quickly, and her stroke faltered.

"Shall we turn back?" he asked.

She smiled, and followed his suggestion. And then she realised that the tide was going out; it had borne her farther than she knew, and she could make little headway against it. It drew her slowly, irresistibly, making sport of her will; the slight undertow caught

at her feet; the whole great ocean seemed set against her, bent on carrying her far out, beyond sight of the land and all familiar things. She was not terrified, but she felt immensely insignificant, and curiously exalted, as if she were a part of the encompassing flood, and for a moment, forgetting that she was not alone, there was a strange temptation to yield herself to the strength of the tide, to go with it as far as it would take her. In a little while longer she would certainly have felt fear, but she had no sensation of sinking yet; she was simply poised between her own efforts and the pull of the tide. Norris spoke in her ear:

"Put your hand on my shoulder"

He had seen quite clearly that she was powerless. She looked at him quickly, and obeyed. He went ahead in a sudden noiseless spurt, cleaving the water as if it were his native element, making nothing of the drag she must have been to him. She did what she could, but it was not much. Yet it seemed the briefest minute—it was perhaps ten—until she felt the firm sand beneath her feet and stood up, with that heavy languorous feeling of one who has come out of the water to the lighter ether.

"I am tired," she said simply. "Thank you. I couldn't have got back alone." A slight breeze touched them; she shivered.

"You're cold," he amended sharply. He was still trying to protect her from the elements; she looked fragile to him, and as if she should be so shielded.

"Yes. Let's run." They did, and fell onto the steps of the hotel out of breath and aglow.

Later, when they had dressed, they went back to the beach again and took up the interrupted tale. She let her hair fly on her shoulders to dry. It had the pleasing quality, rather common to light hair, of not looking stringy when wet, and the light got into it, and

gave it more than its natural beauty, for its ordinary shade was very soft, almost dead, fawn-colour without the hint of red which makes chestnut hair so lovely. But hers suited her too pale, waxen skin, and it had a beautiful texture, the hair "like sea-moss" of Alciphron, which Browning recalled. When her face had that ashen look of fatigue her hair looked faded also; but now it was charmingly alive, and curled in feathery ringlets at the nape of her neck. And her crescent brows were ruffled from the drying of her face, so that they rose in a curious peak in the centre, two circumflex accents over her eyes; and she looked much younger than her years. The immaturity of her emotions, checked and arrested in her disastrous love affair, had kept her face as girlish in expression as when she was in her teens. Not even her waning cheek and the fine lines about her eyes could alter it.

"Odd," he said, his words redeemed from banality by his positive interest in the fact, "that we should have met again, after so long. Are you——"

"Am I—what?"

"Glad?" he asked, overcoming his self-consciousness with difficulty.

She thought awhile.

"Yes, of course," she decided finally. "Why, it's almost like going back home. I think that's why I got used to you so quickly. It does seem as if we'd been friends for a long time. Of course I have no one else here. I might be boring you to death!"

"Do I act like it?" he demanded.

"How do you act when you are bored?" she countered.

"I go away," he said truthfully. "And this time I—— Will you be angry if I tell you something?"

"Probably," she said. "I have a most cantankerous

disposition, and it's been soured by disappointment. But I won't do more than kill you."

"Well——"

"Go on," she said, slightly exasperated. Anything protracted always did exasperate her slightly; she had described herself rightly as wanting to eat life like an orange.

"I followed you here," he said, reddening, and looking slightly defiant. And he picked a blade of grass and examined it as if with deep interest.

"Where? You mean to the beach—from town?" She looked puzzled, scarcely annoyed. "How did you know?"

"I was called out of town yesterday," he said. "And I wanted to see you to-day. So I telephoned; Mrs. Hassard answered. And she told me, and I came down."

"Well, all right," said Hope. "Don't you think it must be dinner time? I shall have to be careful what I tell Mrs. Hassard—silly old goop. *Hiyu cultus wawa*—she talks too much."

So she dismissed the subject, rising with a dainty yawn and lifting her arms above her head with a fine classic gesture to pin up her hair. Carter sat still a moment merely to watch her; she was so slim and straight, not too thin as he had at first thought, but what the French call *fausse maigre*. He had to recant his opinion that she was not pretty if she chose; or, if it were true, then it did not matter.

They strolled back to the hotel and dined, sufficiently if not luxuriously, on the veranda. Moths fluttered round the lamp, which was hardly needed. The sun had gone down, its lingering fires in the west dying slowly. There was no moon. The air remained soft, and yet had a salty tang.

"Listen to the waves," said Hope, leaning her chin

on her hands and leaving her coffee neglected. "I am going down to talk to them. They've just been to Europe."

He insisted on taking all the available wraps, and followed her. It was an odd fancy, but the sound of her walking over the grass gave him pleasure. The dark was settling down, and the tide was coming in again, murmurously musical; the soft swish of her feet and the edge of her gown seemed an overtone of a great muted symphony.

They shared his tweed topcoat, spread on the ground, and she was silent, her chin on her hands again, her profile palely indistinct, looking out to sea, where was nothing visible. At last she moved, put down her hand. Hardly conscious of his own action, he laid his over it.

"I told you——" she began, her voice uncertain, soft, the voice one might expect from that little indistinct white face which was yet warm to his gaze. "This is silly."

"You said—we should be."

"No; I didn't mean—What did you say?"

"I don't know," he said quietly, as if it were just then out of his power to interrogate himself, retrace time and recall what had been.

"Friends," she said, as if she were questioning something, not themselves. And again, as he did not answer, and she felt herself swayed by some invisible force and there pressed on her heart the knowledge that to take her hand from his would destroy the strange beauty of the night and mar the rhythm of the little lapping waves and cover her with loneliness and the dark, she cried out softly, "You were talking nonsense—and this is foolishness!"

"No," he said. "I wasn't—I will do anything you say."

But he put his arms about her, not closely, but so

that she was aware of their restrained strength. She remembered the smooth, powerful play of his shoulders, how the muscles rippled and flexed under her hand, when he swam in with her. And the stark reality of him, the sense of him as flesh and blood instead of the sublimated figure out of an old tale that she had loved in Tony Yorke, took her breath away. She was no longer safe behind the veil of her own illusions, a Princess of the Glass Tower, ardent only in imagination, cold to her lover's lips. Seeing Nick human, she must needs see herself also in the same case; and she knew that if she would make the venture, as she had that afternoon, she had no just right to look to him for help. Even if he were stronger, and why should he be? For the tide had them again; she felt it; it drew her again with that implacable, irresistible ease. The waves were sharply sweet, closing over her head, as they reached hands to one another and felt the flood engulf them. Whether they kissed or not, they hardly knew.

"Ah, no, no," she cried again, but it was herself she spoke to, close against his shoulder. "I am sorry—what did we say?"

The word was magic to unlock his clasp.

"Don't be sorry—my fault—I'll go now." So much she heard; and without his touching her, she could feel him call on all his healthy young strength, gathering himself up tensely to breast the tide again. He would go away, if she said he must; if she would send him away.

For the space of a heart beat, her brain was clear as crystal, and she saw the forfeit, and the gain, as if they had been held in either hand. Nothing impalpable; remote, no stuff of dreams, but the commonplace essentials of life from day to day, were in the balance now. Would she put in pawn the countenance

of the world, order, freedom of all small things, for this? The blood flowed hotly to her heart. The prudence that would draw back and bargain now, when she had been so lavish for the tinsel imitation, struck her as contemptible. For she knew she had found her unknown good.

"Oh-h-h," she said, the word spilling into a little laugh, "what does it matter what we said? I forget." She held out both her hands to him, and to life, seizing her immortal moment without fear.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Chinese have a naïve way of calling their children by some derogatory nickname, during their tender years, thus pretending before the gods that the treasure of their hearts lies elsewhere. We laugh at this, but sometimes imitate it.

Hope, her head bent over her drawing-board, appeared to be entirely absorbed in her work. If she admitted any extraneous thought, it was for other material affairs. She did not feel well. She had got a chill from her belated swim. She hated rising in the morning, and came home with unspeakable relief. She felt very cold all day, and now a burning languor possessed her. But the day's work must be finished. A natural tenacity and single-mindedness, which amounted almost to stupidity, helped her to concentrate. There was nothing in her attitude that indicated she might be waiting for anything or anyone.

Yet, when the door-bell rang, she sprang up instantly, and went rather unsteadily but quickly down the hall. Mrs. Hassard was out. Hope opened the door, and then leaned against the wall. Nick noticed that first.

"What's the matter, dear?" he asked. "Are you sick?"

"Tired," she said, watching him with that curious tentative look he had come to know. He glanced down the hall first, and then without words picked her up and carried her back to her room with the greatest ease. As if that served instead to tell her what she sought to know, she broke into laughter.

"Heap big Injun," she remarked approvingly. "For a little man, that is."

"Ha," he said ferociously, "a little man, am I? You snippet—apologise!" He put her up on his shoulder and she wound her fingers in his hair and drummed on his chest with her heels. One of her shabby blue satin slippers fell off.

"For a mejum-sized man," she amended meekly. "Lemme down; I'm a sick woman." So he laid her on the couch in a careful bundle, picked up the slipper, and put it on with a kiss.

"All worn out," she said thoughtfully. "Look; my toe is coming out of the other one." He struck an operatic attitude, and sang, in a tragic barytone:

"My God, my God, your little feet are frozen!"

"What is that charming bit?" she inquired, mirthfully.

"Rodolphe's song—or is it Marcel's? Very free translation. Never seen *La Bohème*? We must go some time. To appreciate *La Bohème*, of course, you've got to have lobster and champagne afterward; we'll do that too. Not to-night, no?"

"Please, nothing to-night," she said. "Let's be devilish, and play seven-up for pennies. Nick, have you got a lobster and champagne income?"

"No, dear, I haven't," he said candidly. "I have only my paltry stipend from the Cornwall Motor Works, and a rich uncle whose health is positively irritating. But I have enough—more than enough for one," he said hastily. "Hope, is there anything—do you want—"

She did not seem to hear him.

The Cornwall Motor Works made high-power engines of all kinds, but chiefly marine engines of the smaller types, for motor boats and such craft. Nick sold them, or demonstrated them, or did whatever was

required of him. Sometimes he drove in motor-boat or motor-car races, but only incidentally. (It always made Grace very angry.) He was well-liked; he knew himself marked for promotion if he worked for it; and lately, without explaining to himself just why, he had worked for it. He liked machinery; he liked anything that would go.

"Won't you hand me my drawing things, and a cushion; I have a little bit of work to do," said Hope.

"I hate to see you work when you're sick," he said gloomily, doing her bidding.

"Well," she said with assumed carelessness, "you won't, for a week or two. I am to have a rest, the doctor told me. And I told my editor."

"The doctor?" He pounced on the word. "You *are* ill. What else did he say?"

"Nothing else. I've got a low fever; I knew that anyway; and nerves. Don't look so horrified; it's about equivalent to chickenpox. Change of climate, I daresay."

She was quite as much concerned about what her editor had not said as over what the doctor did say. He had been going out when she caught him, and had borne her along with him, in his casual, friendly way, saying he was meaning to confer with her about something. Whatever it was, he let it go by when she made her plea for a brief respite, and, as the only expression of sympathy he could think of, made her drink a champagne cocktail and put her on the subway for home. But she was sure he had been thinking her work unsatisfactory; and equally sure that she had not yet struck the right note. Kennard had not been sorry to lay her off; that was too plain. Something with more "punch" in it; that was what they all wanted; Heaven alone knew what the imbecile phrase meant, and she would have to find out. No doubt it could be

done, but the immediate prospect was not comforting. Her mind was as sluggish as her limbs; it refused to be spurred to fresh efforts, or even to keep the old pace.

"You stay in bed," Nick commanded, "till you're perfectly well."

"And let the ravens feed me?" she inquired.

"Certainly; I've got a herd of trained ravens," he said. "Look here, Hope, have you got plenty of money?" He spoke very fast.

"Yes," she said cheerfully, "lots." She made a mental reckoning; she could afford to stop work for what seemed a long time, in prospect; ample time to recover in.

"I hate to see you sick," he said again, with some indignation at the powers that be.

"Oh, I don't mind," she said absently. "Not for a few days; it's rather luxurious." She was thinking that the respite should enable her to coax back her inventiveness, to formulate new ideas. "I'm sure that under more favourable circumstances I should be a confirmed *malade imaginaire*. But don't let me be a nuisance to you."

He caught up her hands and held them against his heart.

"Don't," he said. "Don't laugh at me. I—love you."

When he said that, her laughter went quickly enough. She was afraid to hear it. She was afraid of vows, of all the spoken ritual, the winged words that return as arrows from the bow of wrath when the cord of faith is loosed. Therefore, inconsistently, she had made a vow to let each day be sufficient unto itself. Her sense of humour must have been dormant just then. It should have reminded her that of the three parties concerned, only one had said anything at

all about this preposterous contract, and that one herself. Dealing with the devil in the middle ages was more comfortable than making terms to-day with the Great Unknowable; one could get security or acknowledgment occasionally.

But what he was vaguely afraid of was that she was going to get away from him. She had run away once, from the beach hotel. And she did not seem able to explain why. That was simple enough, too. She thought he might be sorry again, or that he would expect her to be nursing regret. If she had laughed at him a little afterward, that was not surprising. He had fallen into such hopeless confusion on finding her again in town. Any human woman would have laughed at him. Besides, it helped her to her own balance. But now, when he waited exposed to her shafts, the tears came in her eyes too, and she drew his head down into her arms, with a soft crooning sound. They whispered, in the immortal "little language" of lovers, until Hope recalled herself to duty.

"Now," she remarked patiently, "you will please get my pad. And a cushion. And my pencil. Thanks. You may go on talking, if you won't expect me to listen. Or do you want to read a book?"

"Grace is in town," he answered irrelevantly. "Will you be well enough to come to lunch, or tea, or something, this week, and meet her? As soon as you're better, I should like you to. I must go and see her."

"Humph!" said Hope. "Oh, yes, any time. Well, why don't you go and see her?"

"I will to-morrow." Somehow he felt a premonition that Grace would scold him. "I'll tell her to be ready for an exclusive little party."

"Exclusive little party," repeated Hope mechanically. "Oh, shut up, Nick. How can I work? Yes, I know

I told you to go on talking, but you shouldn't pay any attention to me."

"I won't," he said. "I'll talk all I want to." Having thus declared his independence, he was silent, glancing at Hope surreptitiously from time to time, as if he feared his thoughts might be overheard. He had matter for thought.

Her small but extremely capable looking hands held his gaze. They were so sure and quick.

"Hope," he said at last, "where is your wedding ring?"

"I threw it away," she said briefly, without looking up.

"Did you feel like that?" he asked.

She nodded.

He did not speak again for a long time. Did she still feel like that?

When she finished her drawing, they did play cards, but at ten o'clock she declared she could sit up no longer and sent him away. First she rubbed out two creases on his forehead, but they came back as soon as he was out of her sight. She heard him speaking to Mrs. Hassard for a time, though their words were indistinguishable. Very wearily and slowly she crept into bed. The thought of going out in the morning for breakfast was wearisome.

It was no more cheerful to contemplate when morning came and she waked from a long heavy feverish sleep. So she lay still, watching the shadow shift on the blind. She was not in the least hungry. Why not wait for lunch? Someone knocked.

"Here's your breakfast," said Mrs. Hassard. "And Mr. Carter said to tell you not to go out to-day, and he'll come up and see about your dinner."

"What?" said Hope stupidly. Mrs. Hassard repeated her remarks in a matter of fact tone. Hope

blinked, and tried to think. Nick and dinner appeared with evening. She was dressed; she meant to scold him, but forgot. Her head was heavy, and it was so delightful to have him. He made her feel comfortable. She tried to remember that this would not last. She was in love; and she knew the end of that, by experience. She did not want to depend on him, not even for happiness. But it did not seem to matter. Only by and bye she managed to ask:

"What do you suppose Mrs. Hassard thinks?"

It was not that she cared for anyone's opinion for itself, but she was in Mrs. Hassard's house. Nick only remarked soothingly:

"I wouldn't worry about that; I talked to her." He added to himself: "Mrs. Hassard won't think at all, as long as she gets paid promptly."

CHAPTER XXIV

AND it was true that so far as it could be avoided, Mrs. Hassard did not think. She had been a New York landlady a long, long time. The world was not as she would have it, perhaps, but then she had not made it, and must accept the best terms she could get from it. What milk of human kindness had not dried in her long since in the arid wastes of "furnished rooms" went out to Hope when she perceived her lodger was really ill. But this was probably because no active exercise of benevolence was required of her. Nick took it off her hands, and Mrs. Hassard was glad to let him do it. And Hope did not look very ill. Mrs. Hassard thought her lucky.

She could get about most of the time, when her fever was at the ebb. When it burned up higher, the flush it lent her concealed her growing thinness. She spent most of her time lying, banked up with pillows, on her meagre couch, with a rug over her feet, her eyes half closed, her thoughts shuttling between her old day dreams and flickering visions of an equally fantastic future. Sometimes she would doze, and wake again feeling hot and oppressed, with a reminiscent touch of dread, as if some black pit had opened at her feet in a dream. She had time enough to weigh her affairs, perhaps to be sorry; but she did neither at first. Perhaps the fever would not permit her to think coldly, though none of her fancies even verged on delirium; it was only her old inconsequence and impracticality of mind. So one day after another went by, in a curious timeless manner. She dieted on milk

because it saved the trouble of eating; she pretended to read sometimes, and would close the book in the middle of a sentence. And every few days she would steal out of doors, and come back weakly, with a defeated look, unable to face the cold and the barren inhospitable streets.

After awhile, though the lassitude grew on her, her mind began to struggle with it, in the manner of one gagged and bound when freedom is an immediate necessity. Being ill was a kind of release from a troublesome world, at first. It grew to be an imprisonment.

She had never been ill, or at least not helpless, in her life. It appeared to her in the light of a cowardly stratagem, robbing her of her legitimate weapons. Life had no conception of immediate justice, so far as she could see; it might be immeasurably cruel, or boundlessly generous, but always unfair from the standpoint of to-day. She had said in her heart that she could do without the world, without anyone or anything; in the end, of course, she expected to do without love too, and therefore without Nick. This was as if some mocking power should hold her and say, "Yes, but first taste and see if you like the brew." It is easier to reject the world than to have it reject oneself. She wanted her work, anyway! And where was her independence of Nick, and of to-morrow? She could not walk, and he carried her in his arms, metaphorically; as he had done literally. So her thoughts fretted about in a circle.

And as the days stretched into weeks, and the New Year came and went, the oppression that haunted her in dreams translated itself into a very prosaic fact that stayed with her during the daylight hours. Her position could not be kept open for her indefinitely; it was probably already filled. She did not wish to inquire,

knowing herself still unequal to the resumption of its duties. Her money was dwindling very rapidly.

"Time is a great solvent," she remembered Mary saying. She must, must hold out; she must get well. "If a person could hold her breath long enough," she reflected, almost amused, "she need never drown. That's what I have to do."

But Nick could not see any of this. He brought a supply of cheerfulness, like a gust of summer air, with him each evening; and it lasted as long as he stayed. His entry was the event of her day. She knew his step, and the very way he turned the door-knob. And he too could see, before the door opened, the turn of her head, the lift of her languid eyelids, and her hands outstretched in greeting. Then she would look so bright and gay, he was half deceived into forgetting that it was fever lent the lustre to her eyes and the colour to her cheeks. That gaiety was what shut his lips on the one thing he most wanted to say to her.

She seemed so perfectly satisfied with things as they were! It was largely a tribute to his own vitality. There are people who by their bearing and outlook give pleasure to the beholder as unconsciously as a wild animal, or a tree in leaf, or any other plastic form of nature. While he was with her she lived his life; he was her eyes, her ears, her world. If he could have glimpsed her when she was alone, fretting a pencil with her weak fingers, knitting her brow in baffled weariness over some unfinished piece of work, a gust of protective pity would have swept away his uncertainty.

It was not that he minded eating his words. But her calmness seemed uncanny. He had always been sure that women were somehow "different," intrinsically. He thought, like many men, that the edicts of civilisa-

tion, the forms of morality, were based on the inner requirements of women alone. That women insisted on that system for its own sake, and loved the letter of the law fanatically. He did not realise that if a bow is bent too far it breaks, and civilisation produces its anarchy as surely as solitude. In short, people must live. That explained poor Hope; she would live. Action, even unto violence, was necessary to her. Besides, she had bargained with Fate to be content; and she had bargained with her own pride to seem content. But how was he to know that? Men admit their own mortality, their human weakness, but they want women to be minor goddesses, who can be what they will be. What a woman does is her own fault, or her own choice. So it is, if life is to have any meaning; but one must consider what alternative is offered. She may be only doing the best she can, with great bewilderment.

So he hesitated, failing to find the right word and the right moment:

The equal unreason and omniscience of his goddesses were made plainer to him by Grace. Grace had come back to town just a little too late for his "exclusive party," and gone away again. She oscillated between New York and Philadelphia throughout the winter. Now she was back again. Her temper was not improved, and she spared him none of it. She acted, in short, as if the sight of him exasperated her almost beyond endurance, and at the same time she insisted on his attendance. Her insistence did her little good. Nick did not mind her candid recitals of his shortcomings, but he had not time to listen. Hope got all his spare time, and he was becoming really anxious about her. He could see her going downhill, getting weaker and thinner daily, though she denied both facts. Rather fatuously, he was thinking that if Grace

only knew, she would sympathise with his anxiety.

"Certainly what?" Grace's voice came to him acidly. "I don't really mind your not listening, Nick; but please don't interrupt the thread of my thoughts with such utterly inept remarks."

"Did I say 'certainly'?" he asked guiltily. "What should I have said? I only meant that I agree with you; you've got twice as much sense as I have, Grace."

"Do you consider that a compliment?" she inquired, unmollified. "Now have you the least idea what I was talking about?"

He threw himself on her mercy.

"Not the least," he said shamelessly. "Be a dear, and tell me. I've got such a lot on my mind."

"Oh, go away," she cried. "Go to—whoever does interest you." He took his hat obediently, and she said, "Sit down. If you want my drawing-room to meditate in, you are quite welcome. But as I haven't seen you for weeks, I thought you might care to talk awhile."

"I do," he said, propitiatively. "You haven't told me yet what's going on in Philadelphia."

"I've been trying to for the last half-hour," she said. "What have you been doing?"

"Why, nothing much," he replied doubtfully. "Just dubbing along, I suppose."

"You might tell me," she veered suddenly to a pretty coaxing tone. "Is it a scrape? You *have* got something on your mind. Nick—you're in love!"

"Me?" He looked at her with seeming candour. Should he tell her? Couldn't she help him? A woman might persuade Hope to let herself be taken out of town, perhaps to go South! But Grace would naturally want to know everything. He couldn't, until Hope was able to speak for herself. "No, I'll tell you what I was thinking of. I've got an offer, from the

Rutherford people, to go to Chicago. It might mean something big for me; and then again, I'm doing pretty well with the Cornwall. I can't make up my mind, that's all. Now if you can decide that for me——"

She was watching him, sidelong, with a veiled, intense scrutiny. He was telling the truth, which always makes matters a great deal more difficult. She had to confess herself at a loss, and he departed as soon as he decently could. He had not seen Hope for nearly a day. The subway did not go fast enough. He pictured her lying there asleep over her book, waking to smile at him.

That was a mistake, but even lovers cannot be clairvoyant. Hope went out that afternoon, though it was a labour of Hercules to attire herself for the street. She nearly tumbled over her nose, she told him afterward, in the simple process of buttoning her gaiters. A veil was quite beyond her strength. And then the elevator was not running, as so often happened. It took her ten minutes to creep downstairs.

The editor she sought was out. She had hoped for something from that visit; she had studied the preferences of his periodical two weeks in advance. A fresh wave of weariness and dejection swept over her; she sank back into her chair in the waiting-room. No, she could not go further that day. But on the way home she might adopt a temporary expedient. When she got home, she would write to Mary.

Edgerton's bracelet brought less than she expected, being unused to the ways and rates of pawnbrokers. So she took off her little amethyst necklet and put that in. Then she held onto the edge of the counter while the money was being paid over.

The stairs stretched before her once more. They looked higher than the Rockies. But, after sitting on the lowest step a long time, she essayed them. If the

building had boasted a hall-porter, she would have asked help. It was an old building, and had no such luxury. The elevator boy was taking an opportune holiday.

One flight. She paused for breath, put out her hand to steady against the wall, and it treacherously failed her. Afterwards she fancied she had not found strength to cry out, and merely fell, in a resigned sort of way, to the bottom again, like the problematic frog in the hypothetical well. And by the time she reached the bottom she knew nothing.

It was less than ten minutes before Nick came and found her. He lifted her in his arms and ran all the way up the three flights. She was so very light. His heart seemed to be stopped while he was doing it, and if she were dead, he felt sure it would never start again.

"Did I break my neck?" was her first preposterous question, reviving just as he laid her down.

Mrs. Hassard, hovering distractedly on the verge of things, gave vent to a half hysterical giggle, and Nick choked and hid his face against Hope's hair. She tried to pat his head comfortingly, and gave a little squeak of pain.

"Where does it hurt?" Nick asked, and slipped his fingers gently along her arm.

"Up here." She tried to move her chin to indicate the point of difficulty. "What's up there—my collar-bone?" He unfastened her collar, and found the pale red bruise, already slightly swollen. Mrs. Hassard had telephoned for a doctor.

It was her collar-bone, the doctor said—broken. No, not her arm; that was only very badly wrenched. Nothing else much but a few contusions; bad ones, yes, but bruises couldn't kill.

So, by and by, trussed like a chicken, she lay flat on

her back and listened to a lecture. The doctor sat taking her pulse and scowling at her benevolently. He was an old man, who considered patients a lot of refractory and interesting children.

"Nerves? Fever?" he said accusingly. "Yes! Ha! And what have you been doing for them? I know—worrying! And galloping about the city like a lunatic on a day like this." She tried to explain that galloping was not an accurate description of her gait, but he listened not at all. "Let me tell you one thing, young lady; you may have done the best thing for yourself, though it's not a method I'd recommend generally. You'll keep quiet now. Yes, if we have to get a straitjacket. And you'll probably get well in consequence." He rose and seized his instrument case. "Stop worrying!" he barked suddenly, turning at the door. "I'll drop in to-morrow." He vanished.

"Nice old man," said Hope. "Well, unless the house burns down, there's not much left to worry about. Everything's happened."

But Nick was looking at her queerly. Mrs. Hassard had taken herself off.

"Will you really stop worrying?" he said, in a low voice. "And leave everything to me till you are better—everything?"

She was filled with aches and pains and fatigue, and she leaned back on him mentally, at last, as on a pillow.

"Yes," she assented. "How long am I to be getting well?"

"Only a few days," he said mendaciously. "Now, I've broken orders. You were not to talk, to drink this, and to go to sleep immediately."

She drank something faintly bitter and pungent, and he sat covering her hand with his. After awhile

she felt pain and happiness alike slipping out of her weak grasp as consciousness faded, and so she slept.

Waking to entire helplessness is a strange sensation. It lends itself to speculation, to odd twists of thought and feeling, and philosophical, resigned meditation. Hope wanted a drink, but she could not reach for one, and the day seemed very young, so she did not wish to call.

"I must think of something else," she told herself. "I wonder what it means that I am here—like this—now? Is there any sense in it? Why do nice things seem sensible and disagreeable ones stupid? They are both the outcome of the logic of events. Where am I getting to? Well, where am I, anyway? I can think about Seattle. Is my mind in Seattle, or is Seattle in my mind? So where am I? Isn't my mind me? What is me? My hand, there; if it is me, why can't I lift it and wave it around? It just won't; and it's absurd to say that I could disobey myself. There's a catch in logic there—— Come in. Nick, how did you get here so early?"

It was Nick; he had tea and toast and other things, yet he failed to look ridiculous.

"I stayed here," he explained briefly. Then he fed her with a spoon, and smoothed her pillows in the approved manner of nurses. She did not seem to object.

"How do you feel?" he asked inevitably.

"Not very much," she said. "I'm trying thought suggestion on me, but I find it doesn't extend to the bandages; they remain perfectly immovable. I am a child of light," she recited solemnly. "Pain does not exist; there is no evil, nor no stairs, and especially no elevator; I do not exist myself——" She burst out laughing, and he put down the plate he was holding

and slipped his arm under her head cautiously, kneeling beside the cot.

"You sweet," he said huskily, "won't you laugh again? Hope, your hair smells like flowers."

"My collar-bone smells like arnica," she said, and saw with surprise that he was nodding with sleep. He was white and haggard. "Nick! What is the matter?"

"Nothing." He was very alert again. "Only I didn't sleep last night. I was thinking—— Hope, you can't move now; I've got you; I'm going to keep you if I can. Will you marry me?"

He had said it at last.

"What?" she said faintly. "Like this—all in pieces and tied together again, useless and ugly. Besides, you don't want to marry anyone."

"Anyone but you," he corrected her firmly. "I was afraid you'd remember that fool break. Can't you forget it? You're the loveliest thing in the world, and I can't do without you. You will, say you will, sweetheart; you're not tired of me, are you?"

"Oh," she said brokenly, confronted at last with the real logic of events, the punishment of the unthinking, which she had once truly acknowledged as the most severe of punishments. "Oh, Nick—I can't!" And, as he was silent in sick astonishment, she went on stumbly: "I made you believe a lie. Because I didn't want to talk about it. My husband isn't dead—or anything. It's three years since I saw him. I was such a fool, too."

"But you don't—you don't care for him?"

"No—no!"

"Would you marry me if you could?" He was wondering if he might rescind that refusal to the Rutherford people. He had refused on Hope's account. Now he wanted to accept for the same reason.

"Yes," she said hesitantly. "I never thought of it before; we said——"

"As if that mattered!" He smoothed her hair. "Don't you care; it will be all right. I can see what we must do."

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT do you want me to do?" she asked submissively. So do good resolutions and bad end alike.

"I have an offer to go to Chicago. You shall go, too. We'll have to wait a year, but it would be three years here. A year isn't very long, if I can be near you. You can get a divorce there. You don't care for him?" he insisted.

"I never did. No, you just can't understand. It was an insane mood—like committing suicide." To her relief he seemed to comprehend. "I can't give a real reason," she pleaded. "Didn't you ever do anything that had just no sense in it at all? That you couldn't even make up a good reason for afterward? Oh, did you really?"

"Often," he said thoughtfully. "Small things; they might just as well have been big ones."

"Because sometimes nothing seems to matter; there are no valid reasons for anything. I will never do things like that again—not now."

"No, not now," he agreed, and kissed her. "You will come?"

"Of course," she said. And though she was beginning to feel faint again, and wanted to shut her eyes and sleep, she murmured first: "After all, you have to work for love, the same as anything else. I don't mind. But did you always know that? I believe I thought it was something you could acquire suddenly, like a piece of jewelry, perhaps. And then you just had it. But it isn't."

"No, it isn't like anything else," he agreed again.

The doctor was quite right. Compelled to quietude, Hope felt her tense nerves slowly relaxing, day by day, and the sluggish fever in her veins subsiding. It was slow, for she had the destruction of years to rebuild, and nothing but Nick to help her. Long, dreamily monotonous hours, that resolved themselves into days, days that joined the steady squadrons of weeks, filed by; her fancy seemed to see them passing her door, always outside, for in that high-ceiled narrow room time came to a backwater and ceased. The city whirled and roared about it, filtering in a grumbling sullen noise through the window from which was visible only a high and hideous brownstone wall across the street. In all that seething life she had no part, and was forgotten of it.

Nothing short of the enthusiasm that Nick brought into it could have made that room endurable so long. It was a terrible room, high and angular, with brown walls and carpets and melancholy tall windows. All the furniture in it looked accidental and fragmentary; no furniture could have suited it. It was bleak; it glared sombrely. Always it was either too hot or too cold. But they used it as a temporary storehouse for dreams, and it served well enough.

It was a month before Hope could go out at all, and then she found herself too uncertain on her feet, so easily fatigued, she had to take her exercise cautiously, in graduated doses. Picking up her drawing again presented unexpected difficulties. Her unused fingers and mistreated arm were singularly clumsy.

"My muscles feel like pulp," she said disgustedly. "And I simply must get into trim soon. I wonder if if I could get my job back?"

"You aren't fit to work yet," said Nick. "And—aren't you going to Chicago?"

"Why, yes; when you are ready. But in the meantime?"

"There ain't going to be no-meantime. I'm only waiting till you're fit. And I want to have a few days off, first, and take you out of town. Now, will you be a good girl till the first fine weather, so we can go down to the shore?"

She said she would.

"When shall we have fine weather?" she asked wistfully.

"Oh, soon—in April."

And he took her for a careful pilgrimage of a few blocks, and afterward to tea, because he saw she was feeling restless. It was not so cold just then, for the end of February. Hope realised that this was no such rigorous climate as she had been bred to. There was just enough frost to crisp the air. It was dusk when they returned, by way of Riverside Drive. Leaving it gave them one of those lovely vignettes sometimes to be seen momentarily framed in a cross street that looks to the river. A slender tree, the delicate twigs etching with black the faintly suffused western sky, on one side; the other straightly framed by a wall; and a street lamp hanging in the branches like some marvellous fruit, a globe of the palest frosty violet light. The distant Palisades balanced the picture with their solid masses. Whistler might have painted it.

"What a lot of lovely things there are in the world," remarked Hope, gazing.

"Yes, and you shall have all of them," said Nick fatuously, not following her thought.

She pinched his arm and laughed, and he felt a shock of pleasure, as if he had just discovered that she was near.

"You'll bring that home in a basket, I suppose," she said, indicating the view. "But I do wonder why,

when there is so much raw material for it, we don't have more beauty in life? Are we too lazy? I'm sure some people never know what beauty means. Their faces are so dull and mean, or simply vacant. Or is it my fault that I don't get under their surfaces and discover their sensibilities? A real artist would, I suppose. Why does Mrs. Hassard bore me so? Am I not intelligent enough to find anything interesting in her. And the new lodger; have you seen him? I hate his face, don't you? Yet I don't know anything about him."

"I could live without him," admitted Nick. "Holton, you mean?" But Hope, characteristically, did not know his name. She had passed him in the hall and noted that he had fishy, impertinent eyes; she knew no more about him. "Looks like a bad lot," Nick said. "I think I've seen his kind before." There are many "kinds" in any great city—spawn of the strange deeps of piled humanity. Nick knew all he wanted to about them; they made him rather sick. So he seldom thought of them. He was very like the rest of us.

They went out for a short time every day now, in all weathers, as Hope's strength increased. And in the mornings she strove to recapture her skill with the pencil, such as it had been. She used to amuse Nick with impromptu sketches, and introduced the Moon Babies to him. Sometimes he found them in his pockets, in the lining of his hat, in all sorts of unlikely places, on little homemade Valentine affairs that would always flutter out at just the wrong moment.

She even went downtown surreptitiously again, once or twice, again in pursuit of art editors. Some of the newspapers were kind enough to ask her to call again later, but that was all. She felt reluctant about

going to Kennard. Persistence was all she needed, she felt sure.

Then suddenly it was April, and the looked-for fine weather came, and Nick said they need wait no longer. They would find no flowers nor burgeoned trees, nor any of the luxuriance of summer, but the snow had passed, and they could look again on the sea, even if they could not dip in it. He had a sneaking romantic wish to take her again to the sea.

So they went out of town with immense relief, saying good-bye to Mrs. Hassard with ill-concealed enthusiasm. They never expected to see her again. Hope packed all her belongings. They would return to New York just long enough for Nick to gather up a few loose ends of his affairs. Then Chicago, a smoky Paradise, invited them. Hope faced the prospect with equanimity. She could get work there easily enough, no doubt; it was large enough for all practical purposes.

So she gave up the thought of New York, though she confessed to Nick she wished she had won its favour, forced some recognition from its enormous indifference. There was still that glitter and allure about it. It did look like a treasure box. He promised rashly that they should return some day and loot it, even unto repletion. He felt serenely confident. So do the children of Naples, under the shadow of Vesuvius. He could not even see Vesuvius.

Yet he should have known they were living on sufferance. Perhaps he did, dimly, the next day. Hope did not realise anything just at the time. It has been said that she was rather stupid, especially in the ways of the world. Especially she did not realise how utterly her original resolve had gone by the board. She had vowed to leave men out of her life; to take her happiness by the day; to build nothing on promises.

And just then there was nothing at all in her life but one man; and she was going to follow him to the end of the world—or Chicago, anyway—on nothing but a promise. An observant man, looking at her mouth and eyes, would have known she was born for nothing else.

They went to a very commonplace summer resort, sparsely populated because the season had not begun, its beaches pleasantly free of humanity; the hotels in a semi-comatose condition, hibernating, with the pulse of activity running low. Coming late for lunch, they were almost alone in the dining-room. Then they walked up the beach a little way, and it was theirs. They ran races on the sand; they sat in the pale sunlight and built sand castles, and filled them with sea-shell treasure. And they went back to their hotel agreeably hungry.

Pausing at the bend of the staircase, going to her room to freshen herself for dinner, Hope idly noticed a man at the desk, with his back to her, poring over the register.

"Looks familiar, somehow," she commented fragmentarily, and as Nick turned she nodded over her shoulder. "Down there, the man in the brown hat." Nick looked hard, but Hope went on, and did not observe his apprehensive frown. Nor, after dinner, did she note that the man in the brown hat walked behind them from the dining-room, and spoke to Nick while he bought a cigar. Afterward, in the lounge, it meant nothing that Nick excused himself to go in search of some particular evening paper.

He was gone for ten minutes, when it occurred to her to go upstairs for a forgotten handkerchief, instead of waiting where she had been put.

Through the open transom of Nick's room, which adjoined her own, his voice was distinctly audible.

And he spoke angrily, though not loudly; she failed to catch an intelligible sentence. But she heard her own name; she was sure of that. A man's voice answered him. Nick cut him off short. She stood blankly wondering and listening, so the door opened in her face. Nick opened it, with a gesture of ushering out his companion, though not at all politely. His eyes were very angry indeed, a cold blue in his flushed, set face.

"Hope!" he exclaimed. Then his hand fell on the other man's shoulder—the man in the brown hat. Hope recognised him now—the "bad lot" whose face she had said she "hated"; their fellow-lodger at Mrs. Hassard's. Hope started to speak, but could not think of anything appropriate to say. The other also opened his mouth, but prudently closed it again at the feel of Nick's grip. "That will be absolutely all!" said Nick. "You'd better go quick." The other was a small man, with a furtive, narrow face. He showed his teeth unpleasantly as he twisted away, and looked back once while hastening down the hall.

Hope stood staring, until Nick took her hands and drew her through the door. Then she got a belated sense of shock, for Nick was trembling. It frightened her unaccountably; she threw herself into his arms with an answering shudder.

"What was the matter? What were you quarrelling about? What did he want?" she asked breathlessly.

"Nothing, dear; we weren't quarrelling." But she took him by the shoulders peremptorily, and he reddened again. "At least, I suppose we were," he said, patting her shoulder soothingly. "Just a man's row; I was rude to him, and he didn't like it, so I told him to get out."

"But you were talking about me," she said slowly.

"No," said Nick explosively.

"Oh, I heard you!"

He blushed, he stammered miserably, then he caught her hands again pleadingly.

"Look here, Hope, we *weren't* talking about you; that's just it. That fellow saw us here and tried to force himself on us for the evening; I shunted him off, as I told you; that was when he mentioned you, and I told him to shut up and get out. It was just—just a stupid misunderstanding. The man was a fool, that's all." Poor Nick really did not know what he was saying; he had to satisfy her somehow, and he thought the truth might be alarming to her inexperience. She thought she understood. Evidently the man had insulted her, but no good could come of resenting it further. He should have let it rest at that, but he blundered on: "I'll tell you all about it some other time, if you insist; when we get to Chicago. I'm too angry now." He took her pensive look for disbelief. He looked so unhappy and upset over it, she flung her arms about his neck again, closing the incident. Nevertheless, he had said too much and looked too much. It was quite involuntarily that she asked him later in the evening irrelevantly:

"Wasn't it queer that he happened to be here?"

"Awfully queer," said Nick, and flushed again.

It had shaken his debonair sense of security. There was a hint of the world's hostility toward the individual as such in the affair, the meaningless cruelty of an ordered scheme of things toward all things not orderly. He did not like to think he had put Hope in the position of an outlaw. He wished profoundly that their year was passed. But he had spared her the same uneasiness.

What he had spared her would hardly have troubled her at all. She was seldom daunted by the things she understood, however inimical. Knowing the

worst, she could contemplate it with equanimity. Hope was just the kind of person to make a good breakfast before facing a firing squad. But—she was a trifle afraid of the dark. A common, rather cowardly blackmailer, who had been scared off at that, was nothing.

It was the dark she faced instead, when, a week later, she sat alone in New York, waiting for Nick, who did not come. Not knowing the meaning of either happening, she inevitably associated the two in her mind. It grew to some terrible, unknown menace; connected with herself. Together they overwhelmed her.

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE is hardly a worse torment than waiting in absolute uncertainty, counting the hours and the minutes, running the gamut of indignation and anxious hope and that gnawing grief which cannot find relief in tears. It takes a certain hardihood of soul to wear it out without giving way to utter hysteria. Hope had known heavy and corroding hours before, but then she had lost faith and could take counsel of forgetfulness. Now came a period she never afterwards cared to refer to: three days of mentally sitting still with folded hands before a misfortune whose face was shrouded. There was no way she could turn for information; New York is a human sea, which washes out a footprint almost sooner than the maker is out of sight around a corner.

Nick had left her very gaily, saying he would be no more than two or three hours, or until dinner-time. He meant to go to his office and inform them of his completed plans, to go to his bank and get what money he needed, and if there was time to make a farewell call upon his cousin. That he might, however, defer. And with that he might have stepped off the earth, so far as Hope was concerned.

She was at a small and quiet hotel downtown. By the next morning she knew the pattern of her room's wall-paper by heart, and at six o'clock was down, asking hopefully and fearfully for letters. There were none. So till afternoon she stayed in her room again, unable to read or sit still. Not till then could she feel she might try to find him through whatever channels

her memory might point out. His office, naturally, first.

There are times in every human life when bad luck apparently ceases to be merely casual and becomes malignant. The telephone operator at Nick's office told Hope that he had left, very positively. Gone to Chicago, she mentioned cheerfully, and rang off.

He certainly meant to leave, Hope cogitated miserably. It might be that she had not understood him aright, and he had really severed the connection before they went down to the sea. That avenue was closed. She felt rather stunned, but resorted to the telephone again, to see if any un conjecturable reason could have taken him back to Mrs. Hassard's. That was negatived in brief time. Who had he ever named to her as intimate friends? She fished some names out of her mind, but nothing more; she could as soon find himself as these merely heard-of individuals of unknown address. He had a club. After the fashion of clubs, it could or would tell her nothing. And she began to feel beaten and a little shamed. Something—some impalpable shade of a tone from whoever had answered her at the club—had shown her the world's view of what she was doing, a woman seeking a man who evaded. She could almost taste her own scorn in her throat; it choked her when she tried to speak. Hadn't she vowed to take each day as sufficient unto itself? But her heart spoke, thrusting pride aside. Nick ought to have his chance—if anything had happened to him.

Now there remained no one, except, she remembered, strangely only at the very last, his cousin.

Mrs. Stuyvesant—Studebaker? Sturtevant! Grace Sturtevant. And she lived somewhere downtown—Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth Street? The telephone book showed a Mrs. Ralph Sturtevant in East

Nineteenth Street. Fully conscious of the unpardonable social solecism she was committing, but with every other feeling suddenly lost again in that black anxiety that was suffocating her, she went to the telephone again.

"Who is speaking, please?" A servant's voice; there is an unmistakable inflection in the tone of the trained servitor.

"I should like to speak to Mrs. Sturtevant," repeated Hope harshly.

There was silence a moment, then a voice, clear, almost toneless, as if strained, and infinitely detached, said:

"This is Mrs. Sturtevant. Who is there?"

"I am afraid you would not know my name," said Hope, her throat dry. "But, if you would be so kind, you might be able to do me a favour. Do you know Mr. Norris Carter's present address?"

The merest ghost of a caught-up cry came back to her—"Ah!" Silence again. And then, as even, as toneless, perhaps more distant than before:

"I am sorry I cannot. He has sailed for Europe, I believe. Is there anything else?" The last she might have spared, but it is instinct to strike out when one feels a blow, whencever it come.

"No. Thank you." Hope hung up the receiver. Then, since she had no other thing in the world left, she called on her pride to sustain her and went quietly up to her room again, till her mind should be clear enough to plan.

Her pride and—how much? Mechanically, she looked into her little purse: four or five small pieces of silver. The hotel bill was not paid. Nick had laughingly turned out his pockets before her the evening they returned, and with a kind of naïve pleasure they shared what he found in them. She had a few dollars of her

own, and had spent that immediately on some necessary trifle; and he was going to the bank when he went out.

To Europe. Why, in the name of a blind Providence, should he go to Europe?

And what should she do with that sixty-five cents? Anyone can spend a million dollars wisely; the judicious investment of sixty-five cents is a graver problem.

And she wanted Nick, with a simple hunger, that ache for the accustomed thing which is the substantial half of loving. Against him her pride could not arm itself, because it could find no memory for a weapon. Even to the last, when they had made the laughing division of what he had, she could recall nothing that had not been kind.

"What shall I do?" she asked herself. "I must live." Must she? Yes; if she had said that once to get her own way, she still could see the other side of the shield, and know that a privilege is also an obligation. "That's our business," she thought gallantly, "to live. That's what life's for. To do the best we can with it. Even if we don't know what to do, we ought to do something. When you get through you know at least what you shouldn't have done. And Nick's not dead. Was it something I did? Was it——"

The blindly inimical forces of the world, bent on self-preservation only, dimly apprehended earlier, recurred to her mind. She felt them now. The world had suddenly, violently, projected itself in physical form between them—brick and mortar, walls and gates, and people, endless people, armedly neutral, holding them apart, stolidly, unconsciously, indifferently. No one would help her; and "who is not for me is against me," as a wise man has said. She had

chosen to stand alone; she had her choice. Let her bend her proud, graceful neck and say to her lawless heart: "*Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*" That was what was left her. Every tradition cried it to her; and she had learned now what it meant to defy tradition.

"And yet, I will not," she said inwardly.

So, since there was absolutely no other thing to do, after her last nickel had gone for her fare, and the last editor had said, with casual courtesy, "Perhaps later," she went to see Mrs. Merrick.

Standing before her wavering mirror, unfastening her white collar preparatory to dressing for the street, a week later; she stopped suddenly and looked, long and curiously, at the slim black figure imaged there, white aproned, capped even. She pulled off the cap hastily. "I didn't wear a cap then," she reflected whimsically. "This is the badge of civilisation, which means servitude. Now, is it all the same? I wonder if I've dreamed all the rest, and this is not New York, and I am seventeen. No, I could never pass for seventeen now. How the wheel turned; it made me dizzy, I suppose. Full circle. *Tout passe, tout casse.* Is the rest true? For nothing ever palled on me, except nothing. I liked things, anyway. Too much—well, perhaps. The Laodiceans rule. But I must hurry."

She got into her tailored frock, shabby now, and a little out of fashion, but still smart in essence, and went out to see if the sun still shone. She had hardly looked on it since coming here, and Mrs. Merrick nagged her to go.

It shone; she walked quickly to the Avenue, turned down and followed it to the Arch, turned back and eastward, doubling and twisting, pleased with the old and quiet streets.

"Gramercy Park," she said to herself, seeing it.

strangely, for the first time. "H-m-m," and she sniffed delicately. "This was what I didn't get." She loitered around the square and found herself later in Nineteenth Street, following the sunny side. "Now," she said to herself suddenly, stopping to gaze, "I've found it. That wasn't a front door opened; it was the cover of a novel of the most exclusive flavour."

But it was only a front door, a wide, fan-lighted door, above a high stoop, and out of it a bent old butler in a worn black livery had thrust his meekly scornful white head, to look up and down the street, blinking at the afternoon sun. Whatever he sought, it was not Hope; he popped back again, like a turtle in its shell, and the gentle slam of the door seemed to be directed at her. He had looked over her head, and she laughed to herself.

"They do exist," she reflected. "I wonder, now, if some venerable Aunt Euphemia, who remembers Washington Irving distinctly, and has no living relatives except an asthmatic lapdog, lives there, a little dried-up old kernel in a big, dim shell. She takes the *Post*, and drives in an open carriage with a matched pair and an apoplectic coachman—I've seen her second cousin sometimes, coming out to take the air on the Avenue, with her maid and her butler and her stick to help her across the pavement to the carriage. And I might be living in Mars for all she knows of me, or ever could know; our lives are as remote; we could as soon touch each other as the poles. How disturbing Heaven will be to most of us when we get there; I'm afraid Aunt Euphemia will call it 'very mixed,' and regret her pew at St. Simeon Stylites, or wherever it is. I'd rather be me, after all." She walked on, still smiling. Her conceit pleased her, though it was far, far from the truth.

For she had been looking at Grace Sturtevant's house.

Hurrying, for she had been out longer than she should, and still dreaming, she walked into the once familiar portals of the hotel before she realised she had transgressed and taken the main entrance. So she almost ran toward the elevator, not wishing to turn back. Someone called to her, but she did not hear, and then a boy in buttons touched her respectfully on the sleeve. The clerk was leaning over his desk, holding out two letters to her.

"You haven't been in for a long time, Mrs. Angell," he said. He had never seen her, capped and aproned, in the upper hall; he remembered her first stay there, a winter ago. "This came quite lately, though. You told us to hold your mail?"

"Yes, I did; thank you," she stammered slightly, took the letters, and vanished. For one mad moment her heart had leaped to her throat. But neither bore Nick's writing. One was in Mrs. Hamilton's hand; the other unfamiliar. She opened the last one first, standing in the middle of her room and dropping gloves and envelope on the floor.

"Evelyn Curtis." She had almost forgotten Evelyn Curtis, having lost her home address.

Sitting on the bed, she read the letter a second time, very carefully, as if there might be a trick in it somewhere.

"I have looked and looked for you," it ran, "but no one could tell me anything; Mr. Kennard said you had been ill and never came back, and I am leaving this letter here as a last resort; they said you might call. I hope you get it soon. Those pictures of yours—I am almost as excited as if they were mine—I meant to do something with them before I left, but you know I went home unexpectedly. So I took them

to the Bancrofts'; they get out millions of children's books, and I met Mr. Bancroft abroad. He said they were so quaint, so original, and he has a series of stories he wants done right away, and he said maybe he could arrange to have them run in the *Planet*, or syndicate them. I am sure he can. The stories, too—can't you furnish the stories to go with them? Come and see me at once, when you get this; I'll take you down to see him. Make him bid up; he wants the stuff, and I told him you were getting quite well established; I hope it is true. Do come soon." And so on, to the same fortunate purport.

"Soon?" But instantly. She thrust Mrs. Hamilton's letter into her bodice unopened, and rushed madly down the hall, waving the one from Evelyn, seeking Mrs. Merrick.

Mrs. Merrick, in the linen room, looked up at her cyclonic entrance with an attempt at severity.

"Goodness, I'm glad you're back," she said. "Ida is sick again—I believe that girl *likes* cramps—and if you just would, I wish you'd take her place this evening. There are four rooms waiting to be done right this minute and—what? Oh, now, Mrs. Angell, I don't see how I possibly can let you go off again. I know, but——"

Hope talked her down by sheer lung power, and began to explain joyously.

"Well, isn't that lovely?" said Mrs. Merrick, her kind, homely face lighting with enthusiasm. "Go on, I'll do the rooms myself. Course I knew you'd go sometime, but I hoped it wouldn't be soon. I've been glad to have you."

"What should I have done without you?" said Hope, conscience-stricken. "I will take Ida's turn."

"You will not," said Mrs. Merrick firmly. "Never keep good luck waiting, child. Run along." She put

aside an armful of white things to kiss Hope, who submitted politely. Touched by the disinterestedness of these two women—Evelyn and Mrs. Merrick—Hope went back to her room, and remembered Mrs. Hamilton's unopened letter as she put on her coat.

It was largely made of good wishes and inquiries. Hope had not written for long, and it seemed Mary Dark also wondered at her silence; several letters had gone unanswered. Mary was still with Mrs. Hamilton, but might not be much longer; an exasperatingly inconclusive bit of information. There was hardly any other news, except of the children, and the growth of the town, until the last paragraph. That was evidently an afterthought. That pretty Emily Edgerton, Mrs. Hamilton had heard, or read, was being married during the month, and in New York! The bridegroom was of New York, and since Emily could hardly be said to have a home—why not, Hope wondered, and conjectured an open break—the wedding was to be at the home of one of the bridegroom's relatives. Perhaps Hope would be there! At that simple supposition Hope looked at her cap, lying on the floor, and grinned. She recalled the day of the month with an effort. Emily must have been married yesterday.

And Conroy Edgerton, quite as certainly, must be in New York.

Even so, he seemed a million years away; with the old mad days, when she wanted the world and he was going to give it to her. Mad days, and merry. Had she been like that? Quite seriously she went to the mirror; for when one remembers old days one feels no longer young. And she thought she must wear a different face now, unrealising how much she was the same—the girl who had helped one man to play with fire; the woman who had walked through it to reach another she wanted.

And here was Conroy Edgerton just around the corner, in at the death again, in a sense. She seemed destined to be shipwrecked at his feet. He had been so kind that other time. What would it be like to see him again?

Not difficult, at least. For all this was New York, and Mrs. Hamilton had naturally credited him with no address; he was no needle in a haystack. By no stretch of the imagination could one consider him a needle! Knowing New York a little, and him a great deal, she would have wagered her new-found luck on her ability to find him. If he hadn't already started home, or if he wasn't stopping with some other tiresome relative. She quickened her pace up the Avenue, as if he might make good his escape before she reached Thirty-fourth Street, and Peacock Alley. Having once thought of seeing him, homesickness, loneliness, swept her towards him with the force of floods breaking bounds. The revolving doors let her into the huge brown stone hostelry with a seeming of added haste, impelled her on past the rows of gorgeous, somnolently watchful women and plump, prosperous men, till she came to the desk. She wrote her name on a card—"H. Angell," as she was wont to sign her drawings, quite forgetting that Edgerton might not recall her by any such cognomen—with a line asking if he could come down—and waited.

The close, warm, scented air made her sleepy; she leaned on the arm of her great carved and gilded chair, her face shadowed by her hat, studying with an impersonal eye the people who quested past her. So it was she looked on Edgerton first, hardly realising his identity, as he came toward her down the strip of red carpet, looking over her head. He was just like all these other solid, comfortable, middle-aged men; there were thousands of him. Until she stood up, directly

under his nose, and held out her hand and called him by name; then he was different to her. Because he was kind still; his shrewd eyes, after one moment's amazement; still enshrined her—and were sorry for her! She had never known before that he had always been sorry for her; she had not known that he was so clever as that. Her heart, which had felt as if constricted by invisible hands since Nick's vanishment, seemed to escape and unfold, and her frozen sensibilities melted. He was speaking, enfolding her gloved hands in his warm cushioned clasp.

"*You!*" he said. "Did you know I'd been looking for you? And here you are by accident—I just came downstairs to meet a man—no, was that your card? By Jiminy, I didn't recognise it. Come in here where we can talk." He swept her away and commandeered a headwaiter, who bestowed them in an obscure, palm-sheltered alcove, and stood at bland attention.

"But I've only a minute," said Hope. "I don't want to eat. Give me—oh, give me some tea," she said desperately, though it was six-thirty. "I've an engagement with a girl right away. And I must go back to work."

"What work?"

She spread her pretty hands, unspoiled by a mere week's labour, on the cloth.

"I am a maid at the Alhambra Hotel."

This with an air so demure that a wiser man than he would never have guessed she was taking in, at an eye-ful, all the resplendency of his diamonds, the fineness of his linen, the creased newness of his suit, and mischievously pelting this brutal fact of her manual toil at them; his insignia of ease—like a small boy's snowball aimed irresistibly at a silk hat.

"What?" Now he appraised her in turn, for con-

firmation. "I don't believe it." But he did; he believed that hat of hers. "Good heavens, why?"

"Oh, bad luck, bad management. Better than starving."

"Or——" He stopped.

She shook her head.

"Not that. Expensive, but I like to own myself. I suppose you'd think you might have been to blame?" Some such matter, truly. She said cryptically: "How we all flatter ourselves! I think I never had a better friend than you. If I have had no success, it was not for lack of the best counsel. Besides, perhaps I have." A childish pleasure in "saving it up" made her defer her very new news. "Why don't you tell me something about your own self?"

"Emily's married," he said, with doting regret. "Got a good fellow. They sailed for France this morning; biggest suite on the *Mauretania*. Now, look here, Hope, we've got to change things a bit for you."

"What shall we do?" she asked, gravely mischievous. "We failed once, you know. You don't want to try it over again?"

She studied his face; the complexity of his feelings made it worth while, but she could barely restrain a shout of mirth. And then, unexpectedly, she perceived a hint of the old feeling, a tenderness, a baffled reaching for something elusive, for the wraiths of dead dreams. He put his hands in his coat pockets, though the table was between them, and gave her a look of sheer appeal.

"Do you want to?" he asked slowly.

"No, no." She felt very small, and remorseful. "I oughtn't to plague you; forgive me, you were always good. It's too late—it was always too late——"

"It was always too late," he nodded. "But, God,

how I used to wish it wasn't. Say, Hope, where's your husband?"

"I don't know," she replied truthfully. "And you?"

"My wife got a divorce. It was a kind of a jolt, but I'm glad now. The fact is—But here, now, are you going to let me help you?"

"You're just the same," she said. How restful, how refreshing, to find someone just the same. "But look, I don't need it. I've got everything already—everything anyone can give me, I mean—read this; look here."

She thrust the letter into his hands excitedly, poured a torrent of explanation over him while he tried to read it, and finally made the matter reasonably clear to him, more or less in spite of herself.

"I knew you'd make it sometime," he beamed. "I'm going to order some champagne—sure, you've got to celebrate. Buy a Paris hat, and a trunkful of new dresses."

"Do I look so *passée* as that?" she queried. "Very well, I will—to-morrow. Now I have got to go and see the girl who wrote the letter; I looked for you first, Con. Oh, indeed I must; but to-morrow I will do as you say, anything; I know this is mean of me, but good-bye." She pushed away her untasted cup of tea, and rose, drawing on her gloves.

"Why did you come?" he asked aggrievedly. "Now I've got to eat my dinner alone. Where shall I find you to-morrow?"

"Still at the Alhambra. Oh, I came because—because I was alone, too. And I wanted to tell someone my news." She pulled down her veil and hurried out, bumping into a gold laced page at the door, because more than her veil obscured her eyes. All this wealth, this soft luxury, was what she had foregone from Edgerton, but she was not thinking of that. "It was Nick I wanted to tell," was her thought.

CHAPTER XXVII

BUT if she had spoken it in his ear, he could not have heard.

At the office, where he made the rounds to say good-bye to the men he knew, their cordial regrets would have touched him if he had been able to bring his head down from the clouds. They noticed that, too; Everson, the manager, a man of dry speech and a quick eye, pricked him neatly.

"You needn't look so damned glad to be going. What? Yes, you do; you look like a new bridegroom. And you won't even give us a chance to congratulate you."

"Rats," said Nick, reddening furiously, and laughing. "Want me to burst into tears? Say, I do hate to leave."

"Well, come and have a drink, anyway," Everson offered. Men liked Nick. "There's a long dry spell ahead, if I know weather signs. Never mind the denials."

"Don't think I've got time," said Nick dubiously. "I've got to go to the bank, and then a call to make."

"Take you round in my car," said Everson, putting on his hat. "Drop you wherever you say; I've got to go uptown anyway. Anyone else on?"

Several of the other men took the invitation, but they left these in a few minutes at the café. Nick got into the motor with Everson.

"East Nineteenth," Nick requested, after they had left the bank. "This is your new car, ain't it? Got the new motor in it; really! Let's try it."

Everson had been driving himself; they shifted seats, and Nick took the wheel.

"Smooth," he said admiringly.

Everson told him it was still on trial in a sense, having come from the shop but the day before, and was the first to leave the hands of the experts.

"Sorry we're not on a speedway," he added. "You could show me a little of your fancy driving. Could you do a hairpin turn around the Arch?" They were just passing it.

"Climb it, if you like," said Nick, looking quite capable of carrying out his threat. "Watch me spurt—no, wait till I get in the clear a minute."

Now they were in lower Fifth Avenue. It was more than usually free from traffic; Nick tailed in behind another motor, let it gain on him for a block or two, and then risked the ire of the traffic policeman, if one were looking, by jumping to about twice the rates the regulations allow. He had calculated to a nicety on that car ahead; that is, on its proceeding soberly at its fixed pace. Which was where he miscalculated. Without even a warning explosion of the engine, it swerved a little towards the curb, skidded, and stopped within its own length.

Something, Nick inferred in the moment's grace allowed him, had gone seriously wrong with that car, and the driver had simply jammed his brakes. Nick tried to turn out and pass, but there was not enough leeway. He yelled to Everson, who jumped, and braced himself, hearing the peculiar grinding crash of collision just before he was aware of himself sitting on the pavement against a lamp-post and looking about curiously for his own hat, which was still on his head. In the impact, and in Nick's final effort to get by, Everson's car had twisted a little sideways, with a

bucking motion that just stopped short of overturning, and Nick had been unable to hold on.

Everson, uninjured by some freak kindness of the God of Wheels, came running up. Everybody in the world, in fact, seemed to be charging down on Nick in mad excitement; people fairly sprouted from the paving stones. The owner of the car in front forgot his grievance and was the first to offer a hand. Several distracted bystanders began inquiring loudly for a doctor.

"Thanks, I'm all right," said Nick, and got to his feet to prove it. He felt a little light-headed from the shock—that lamp-post had been very much in the way—and there was a good deal of dust on his clothes, but beyond that nothing. "Glad I didn't kill you," he remarked apologetically to Everson, who swore in a grateful and relieved manner and shook his hand.

Then a policeman interrupted, with heavy authority. Their names, places of residence, who owned the car?

"I do," said Everson hastily, complying with all three requests. He understood instantly Nick's look of frantic appeal; Nick had told him he had a train to catch, to say nothing of that call. Might be a very important call. Everson's heart was not so dry as his manner. "My friend here is from Buffalo; I was driving—you don't need him, do you? My car; I'll answer for the whole thing; here's my card. Grab a taxi," he added to Nick, in a quick aside. "Send me a line from Chi. Sure you're all right? Fine. Good luck."

He engaged the policeman again; Nick vanished, not so much through as around the crowd, and picked up a predatory taxi that had been hovering hungrily near.

It was only five minutes to Grace's, and she was at home.

"Do I look a wreck?" he asked her, refusing to shake hands. "I wonder if Skene could brush me down a bit—of course I'll tell you all about it, but I feel like a tramp now."

Skene, the butler, took instant charge of him, and brought him back shortly, entirely presentable, to Grace's impatient presence.

"I suppose it took an upheaval of nature to bring you here," she said, but smilingly. "How can you tease my curiosity so?"

"Honest, I was on my way here," he assured her. "And I was in such a hurry I smashed Everson's car doing it. There was a lamp-post, too; I believe I broke that with my head. Feels like it. Can you see a goose-egg? Oh, it wasn't anything really; we took the tail-lights off another car for a souvenir, and I came on in a taxi."

"What flattering eagerness. You've really been a very bad friend, Nicko. I haven't seen you for—how long?" She could have answered her own question, almost to an hour.

"You'll think me worse," said Nick cheerfully, getting to the point in his usual style. "I came to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" Grace echoed vaguely, looking at him with her clear grey eyes dilated. "Why? What have I done?" So near she came to betraying herself.

"You? Why, you haven't done anything. It's me; I'm going away. You know, I told you about it before." He put his hand up to his head, as if unconsciously. "I took that Chicago job. Rising young business man. You ought to be proud of me. Can't lecture me any more for lack of ambition."

"Oh," she said, and then, regulating her voice carefully, "I shall miss you."

"I'll miss you—and the kiddies," he assured her.

"And the——" His voice thickened, a dull flush rose to his face.

"What is it?" She leaned forward, sensitive to every shade of his expression.

"I—don't know," he muttered. "Going away——" Then he swayed in his chair, and with arms thrown out a little, pitched forward, with his head on her knees.

She did not scream, nor start: Grace had good stuff in her. And her slim body held more strength than one would credit. Putting her arms beneath his, she lowered him to the floor, put a cushion under his head, and rang for Skene and her maid.

"A doctor—yes, Doctor Lempriere, quick," she commanded the terrified girl. "Tell him a surgical case, probably concussion. Life and death. Go—don't stand gaping. Help me lift him, Skene. To my own room; it's the only one on the ground floor."

Between them they managed it, and laid him on her own dainty bed, his boots making a dusty streak on the white lace counterpane.

And there he stayed, unknowing, if not uncaring, while Hope waited and hardened her heart to go on alone.

Dr. Lempriere, entering—they got him without delay—cast a quick look around even while he was examining Nick. He had not stopped to ask what was the matter; as a doctor, he felt it his business to know.

"Clever girl, Grace," he said at last, his deft fingers still exploring Nick's hair. He had known Grace absolutely all her life, having assisted at her entrance thereto. "Concussion; you guessed it. How did you get him here? You say he had a motor accident?" He was removing Nick's collar now.

"He came—he walked in. Talked to me." She

spoke shortly, gripping her hands together, holding on to herself. "How could he?"

"It doesn't always show immediately," he assured her. "I've known a man go four hours with a broken neck and not know it. Same thing with concussion. Now we can't move him——"

"I don't want him moved," she cried passionately. She had him now, by a very miracle, just when he was about to leave her. He was hers, at least so long as he was helpless.

"Well, then, we'll have to spoil your pretty room for awhile," returned Dr. Lempriere calmly, looking about at the muslin curtains, the shining array of silver on the inlaid dressing-table, the rose-flowered chintz chairs. "That nurse ought to be here by now; I told Skene to 'phone. And where's that hot water I asked for?"

He set Grace herself running errands for him, seeing with a keen professional eye her need of some immediate distraction. And before he went away, leaving Nick to the efficient ministrations of a trained nurse whom Grace detested on sight, he drew her outside the despoiled chamber and soothed her with assurances that convinced her more than himself. With a constitution like that, he said, while there was always danger, Nick had all the odds in his favour. He merely needed quiet, absolute quiet. Grace had better save her strength for his convalescence, when she could really help; which was the doctor's gentle way of bidding her keep away from him now.

Of course they could not keep her out always; not in her own house. Though he could not recognise her—they kept him under opiates for quite a week—she had to look at him sometimes, to watch him wandering in that dim borderland between here and the vast reaches of space the eye cannot pierce. And when

his lips moved, she tried not to listen, and did it despite herself. She was afraid of hearing the other woman's name, as she knew she had heard her voice.

To the end of her days Grace never quite forgave herself that lie which uttered itself so spontaneously. It had come to her like a weapon which in a moment of stress is seized unconsciously and discovered in the hand, later, with bewilderment. As a weapon, she used it to guard the door to that quiet room; it was more for him than herself. But later, when she realised everything, she realised that she had wounded her own honour most with it. But even for that she would never have cared, if she could have felt she had served him. She tried to think so; she had to. Whoever that other was, she could have no rights. Nick would have told her, surely—had he come to tell her?

That small consolation was torn from her with his first conscious word. Strangely, it was on the very day Hope stood weaving fancies before Mrs. Sturtevant's door. The butler, when he put his head out into Hope's view, was looking for the doctor, who delayed. Nick was waking; the nurse thought he might be conscious. And he was strong enough now to be permitted to use his faculties. His unconsciousness had been prolonged by narcotics because when at the end of ten hours he first revived he had immediately tried to rise and dress. He wanted to go somewhere, do something—at once. So, each time, they simply gave him more of the drug. And Grace, after seeing him so long in that terrifying stupor, had forgotten every wish she had ever had save to see him look at her again with clear eyes and hear him speak. She thought she could desire nothing more now; the old pain was swallowed up in this oppressing fear.

She had her wish—poor Grace! "Which of us,"

asks the master satirist, "has his desire or, having it, is satisfied?"

The doctor seemed long in coming. She slipped into the sick-room quietly. The sound of her light step on the bare polished floor seemed the signal for his awakening; perhaps he knew it was different from the firm purposeful tread of the nurse. In that vague region of the mind where our unformulated thoughts rise and dissolve ere seen, he may have had some wild hope.

Grace went to the bed-side, stooped, and put her hand on his. The nurse, too late to restrain her, held a finger to her lip. And then Nick opened his eyes, looked at her with a sort of surprise, and asked:

"Where is Hope?"

"Where is what?" asked Mrs. Sturtevant, in a soft, tense voice.

The nurse motioned her again for silence, quite unheeded.

"Hope—where is she?"

"She's coming," the nurse interposed quickly, and whispered to Grace, "Agree with him, whatever he says."

"Have you sent for her?" Nick insisted, speaking directly to his cousin, and trying to lift a hand to his bandaged head.

"Yes," she said steadily. "Go to sleep, Nick; she'll come."

"That's—good."

"You mustn't talk any more now," the nurse interposed authoritatively, and poured out a draught for him.

Grace went out. She felt dull, tired, rather old. She had not strength to be glad, in the first reaction.

If she could have found Hope she would have sent for her. Since there was nothing else to do, she did

not much mind doing it. After all, what did it matter? She did wish Nick to be happy. Anything to have him well again. She could be jealous, indeed, but not petty or vicious. But she did not know even this strange woman's name. She heard that, too, when he was strong enough.

"What did I say?" he asked her inevitably. A mere human curiosity prompts that question to everyone who has known delirium, or wonders if he has known it; a desire, perhaps, for an unguarded glimpse of one's very self. Then he read in her face that he had said something; and he was also chafing under iraction, burning with anxiety for Hope. The horror of having left her alone, penniless, in the city whose dark depths he knew too well, was goading him. "What did I say?" he insisted, with weak emphasis.

"You asked for someone," said Grace. "I am not sure of the name—Hope?"

"Did I?" He was quiet, and then looked at her imploringly. "Where is she?" he begged.

"But who is she?" asked his cousin gently. "I do not know anything. You never told me." This with faint bitterness.

"She's the woman I'm going to marry," said Nick. "I meant to tell you, Grace, as soon as it was all arranged. And now I don't know where she is." There was anguish in his voice.

"What is her name? Where does she live?" asked Grace calmly. "I will write or telephone her. Certainly she should be here."

"Her name is Mrs. Angell. She was at the Nassau Hotel; but I had the nurse telephone there, and she's gone. I can't find her." Grace could have wept for very shame; for his face betrayed too clearly what she had done to him.

"It won't be hard to find her, surely," she soothed him. "I will send to inquire."

"I know—send Updyke to me—you know his address?"

She knew him slightly; he was a friend of Nick's of long standing. She promised; cheered him with assurances of the ease with which Hope must be found; assurances Updyke, a young man of happy disposition and no cares, reiterated when he came. Surely they would find Hope.

But they did not.

The assurances wore thin even before Nick was able to leave his bed. It was as if she had tried to cover her tracks.

Grace found his proximity gave her little happiness. Perhaps it was this she needed, this daily, hourly sight of his indifference to her, his calm and slightly egotistic friendship—the friendship of cousins—to kill her lingering, patient hopes. At the last she would have given him Hope, she would have given him all the women in the world, to take that cloud from his face, lend the old light to his eye. But "who among us has his heart's desire," or can give another his? It came to this, that, even asking nothing, she could get less.

Hope had not tried to cover her tracks at all. Nothing was more natural than that she should send a porter from the Alhambra to bring her baggage to her, when good fortune enabled her to redeem it—she had gone to Mrs. Merrick with no more than what she walked in—nor than that he should not have been especially noted at the Hotel Nassau. Her things were removed; that was all they knew. Anyone might have taken them; Elijah might have called for them in his chariot of fire for aught they recalled. She did leave a letter for Nick.

But Carter is not an uncommon name. By another diabolical turn of ill-luck someone else got the letter, made nothing of it, and it went into a waste-basket. Another letter she sent to his office. That was forwarded to Chicago, and wandered about disconsolately in the limbo devoted to such poor strays until it was frayed and dingy. It reached him just about a year later.

There were nights, in the weeks of searching, when Nick walked in hell. He used to remember, with such horrible clearness, just how much money Hope had had; those little pieces of silver.

Doggedly he went back to work; there was nothing else to do, and he needed the money, to look for her. He used to look at the faces of women in the streets, in the subway, everywhere. He stared, and never smiled. It was her distinction, at least, that he never even thought he saw her. Chicago was given up. How could she have got away from New York? So Spring passed, and Summer.

Grace Sturtevant was haunted by the memory of that shy, desperate voice asking for him over the insensate telephone. She never dared to tell him. Sympathy for him became a veritable dagger in her breast; her own suffering, dulled now into the resignation of the intelligent, quickened understanding. It did not need his grave, unhappy eyes, his face thinned and hardened, to show her his heart. She knew just what emptiness was there.

He never told Grace much. No one can honestly tell his or her own love-story. Those glowing figures who carry the banner of love down the long corridors of time are not flesh and blood; they cannot die because they never lived; they are only symbols. Their story is every lover's story—but no one's. Love denied, love fulfilled, love betrayed; each of a dozen

phases has its symbolic lovers to interpret it. They are like vessels fashioned of crystal by great artists to hold a mighty wine.

But we lesser creatures hold up our little earthen cups for the pouring, and are filled. If we treasure the cup afterwards, poor shard that it is, we also prefer to guard it from the smiles of the unbelievers. All love stories are sublimely silly; but love never is.

So Nick, for fear of being maudlin—he knew now, to his own confounding, that a man can weep if he must—and of putting into words the sheer want of Hope, said little. What did she look like, Grace asked; and he brought up a picture of her, sitting rather hunched up, in childish fashion, over her drawing-board, rubbing her cheek with a charcoaled finger—funny, and heart-rending. He said her hair was “light,” in that large way of a man. He saw her again, brushing it, with a book propped on her knee, and her blue satin slipper dangling from the tip of an arched foot on a chair rung. He simply stopped. The more because it was not a lover’s vision of her he had, something to be rhymed and sung and flaunted with the bravery of inexperience in the eye of an envious world. It was the husband’s tender, more homely portrait, which he carries next his heart, and hides with a profoundly casual air. The lover may fancy his lady’s perfections so obvious that none can miss them, short of imbecility; but every true husband knows that only himself can see his wife as she deserves to be seen.

Was it then still so keen? Grace sighed inwardly, half glad that she was yielding herself to apathy; she thought her soul too desolate to feel more than a dying pang, unrealising but that it might be but going fallow, for a richer fruitage another season. She gave up the attempt, and rang for tea. The butler

brought it promptly, on a tray laden with old silver and egg-shell china; Grace, bending above it, her slim, gracious hands busy, her fine head delicately stooped as if with its weight of pride, her crown of pale gleaming hair, and the soft shifting flow of her olive satin gown, made a picture of sheltered refinement that took Nick's eye in a curiously impersonal way. Sheltered, that was it; safe, guarded, delicately clad. And how was Hope faring? He rose abruptly; it was more than he could bear. Oh, he would not wish Grace other than sheltered; he would wish all women safe now for the sake of one; but it was too sharp to look on and think of closely.

"No, thanks, I won't have any," he said. "May I go to the nursery? Am I rude? I beg your pardon, Grace—— Hemlock, if you like," with a poor effort at a joke. "Couldn't I take a biscuit to Maddie?"

"Of course; you'll find her there. The three of you!" Grace smiled faintly, but did not offer to go with him. All that was over.

Madeline greeted him with a scream of joy, reproved instantly by her nurse as unladylike; clutched the biscuit with one fat hand, and offered an exchange with the other. While he was convalescing she had had him so much she tyrannised over him entirely now, and gave him the half of her kingdom. Never a new toy could be accepted entirely without his approval; he had to put her to bed when he happened in at the right time, sing to her, tell her stories, read her picture-books. It was a picture-book she was thrusting on him now.

"Wead me," she said, climbing on his knee and dropping the book in process.

He just caught her from diving after it head foremost, brought her back by the slack of her pink romp-

ers, and established her with the book on her pudgy lap.

"Nice book?" she inquired anxiously.

"A bee-yu-tiful book," Nick told her. "Let's see what's inside it."

"Babies," said Madeline. "But—dey have no muv-ver!" She seemed equally distressed and astonished by this unnatural circumstance, and spread one dimpled hand down on the opened leaf to point out the sad fact, thereby making the view difficult. Nick lifted it, opened his mouth to read the first verse—it was a series of jingles with wreaths of plump, solemn, preposterous, lovable imps prancing about the stanzas—and said softly, "Lord Almighty!"

"Wead me," demanded Madeline peremptorily.

"What?" said Nick, rather as if he did not understand the familiar request. Then, to her vast indignation, he set her down abruptly and carried her book to the window. "Hope!" he said again, to himself.

There was her name down in the corner—on the title-page, too, above the publisher's imprint—incredibly plain, like something one has mislaid, and finds again in the simplest and most obvious place. And the very pictures. Those funny little cherub heads, that used to pop up out of her portfolio. She had names for a dozen of them. He never could tell them apart, unless by their attitudes, but she declared seriously that he must be very stupid; their dispositions were entirely different. She could tell their life histories—lived in the moon—to prove it.

Madeline was fairly storming at him now. He paid no heed at all, tore the fly-leaf out of the cherished book, and dashed out.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Sturtevant, lifting her cheek from her palm as he re-entered the drawing-room. A wail followed him from the nursery.

“Nothing, nothing at all.” He looked at her with a bright, unseeing eye. “Everything’s all right, I think—I have to go—I’ll tell you if it’s true——” He went out like a man drunk on new wine, and left her staring, while Maddie’s shrieks of rage and distress echoed unheeded.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WITH so much crowding on her to be done at once, with success, as it were, sitting on the doorstep until the house should be dusted for it to enter befittingly, it was some time before Hope had time to cast her accounts with life, and ask herself how her balance stood, for good or evil. She had to go home first, and yet more immediately she had to see Evelyn Curtis. That had been the first and most necessary step, and was not neglected. Their reunion was almost incoherently rejoicing; no one could have been more generously enthusiastic than Evelyn. Hope offered her the rights of an agent, but Evelyn would hardly accept; she named a fee almost nominal.

Hope took her to dine with Conroy Edgerton the next night, to honour her new contract. She came to terms with the Bancrofts, tentatively, earlier in the day and in haste. Excellent terms for a beginner, too, and Mr. Bancroft suspected her naïve manner for a pose, but proceeded to farm out her work so they should not suffer. Everyone was pleased, except possibly Edgerton at having a gooseberry for dinner. But he enfolded Evelyn with a large geniality, ordered champagne generously and toasted the contract and the Paris hat Hope had bought to please him, and prolonged the dinner to a supper after a vaudeville theatre.

"I thought we should have a long talk," he said, a little regretfully, in an aside, as he helped Hope on with her cloak. "However, you'll probably hear all

the news." Hope, adjusting the symbolic hat, missed his slightly guilty look. "You might write to me," he suggested. "You know I've got to go back to-night. If I come to New York again—I may soon—I'd like to see you."

"You can always find me through the Bancrofts," said Hope. "Certainly, write. You don't know how odd it has been to see you again. Do you remember the night we set the prairie on fire?"

He looked like a schoolboy "caught out," and she burst out laughing. That night they had never thought to sit down so impersonally to a reminiscent evening.

"Plenty of water under the bridge since then, Hope," he said, and, his strangely youthful, ruddy face taking a deeper tinge, added, "Do you think I look much older?"

"You?" She went on laughing. "You'll never grow up, Con. I'm an old woman alongside you." What tricks Time can play, that she could take such a tone to him! "What did you say about news? Is there anything new?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Edgerton, and sighed.

"Marriage and death and division" had indeed wrought with his life. It seemed rather pathetic to Hope; she had a fellow-feeling for him.

He put the girls in a cab, and they saw him standing on the curb as they rolled away, a fine, substantial figure of a man, a credit to his tailor, his cook and himself—but alone.

Hope indignantly recalled that sympathetic sigh she had devoted to the touching picture, weeks later.

But then she was half across the world again, and talking to Mary; for yet more water had flowed under the bridge. When the wheel of life did begin to spin for her, it went at breathless speed. The letter call-

ing her home came in immediate answer to her first jubilant announcement of good fortune. Both her father and her mother wrote. They were growing old, they said. They needed to say no more. She set to work feverishly to do what must be done immediately, and transmuted her first check forthwith into a railway ticket.

But there would be many more checks. She was really "made": the welcome accorded the little syndicated stories, which the Bancrofts found a market for immediately, was an absolute assurance of that. Those were Mary's stories, and Hope had to go and see Mary and learn what her share in them was to be; but after all it was the drawings that counted most. For the rest of her life Hope could "walk delicately"; she could have as much purple and fine linen as might be reasonably required by one of her stature; in short, she had her passage booked for the big liner whence Edgerton had once surveyed her cockle-shell making for the open sea. She was rather glad; the excitement of the struggle for daily bread had lost its first keen edge. It had come just at the right time; not too soon nor too late.

Mary she saw more or less by the way; the only break in her journey. Mary, rather more vivacious than of old, and delighted to the verge of extravagance at the sight of her returned prodigal, come on her without warning, just off the train.

"You—you little viper," she exclaimed, almost upsetting the tea-table in a rush to embrace her at sight of Hope's mischievous eyes peeping in at her. Mrs. Hamilton had hastily smothered an outcry of surprise at the door to permit of her carefully planned entry. "Heavens, did you come on wings? You got my letter—not that you deserved it, leaving me in ignorance

so long. Take off your hat." She proceeded to divest Hope of her outer garments by friendly violence.

"I got no letter," said Hope, submitting laughingly. "I got nothing; I am going home."

"For the fatted calf—I know."

"Yes," Hope began, and stopped. That was too good a guess. "Why, how did you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"That I had 'arrived,' in a becomingly small way, of course. I haven't told you. I was always just a pane of glass to you; but this is too much. Tell me, or I'll have you burnt for a witch."

"And I'll have you stuffed for a Strasburg goose!" retorted Mary, wiping the tears of enjoyment from her eyes. "Con told me, of course; wrote me instantly."

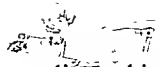
"Ah, he did? What—what's the meaning of that? Does he write you everything instantly? Oh—oh—Mary, where did that come from? Was it for that you saved him from me?" On her third finger Mary wore an enormous emerald. Hope had never seen anything so wonderful; she gasped over it, and rolled her eyes to heaven. "Is it really, really true?" she demanded, when she could command words.

"Yes." Mary was her old, rather mocking, good-humoured, impenetrable self. "So now you see why my most unworldly and righteous uncle helped me!"

"And you called *me* a viper!" said Hope, adding that to the recollection of her misplaced pity for Edgerton's loneliness. "Mary, are you going to be happy?"

"Yes, and I shall make him happy, too," said Mary calmly.

She could; she could make any man happy, if she chose. There was that in her would hold a man,



divert him endlessly, and leave him always a little puzzled and wholesomely fearful.

"It's time someone was good to him," said Mary again, her manner suddenly changing into a curious mixture of protective tenderness and belligerence—the eternal woman. "He is rather a dear, you know, Hope. Well, I wrote you to come for the wedding. Will you? And——"

"I should say," said Hope, "that he's always been pretty good to himself! Well—and what?"

"And will you kindly stay away afterwards?" said Mary. "Or promise not to steal my husband, if I let you come?"

"Well, of all things—— What do I want with your darned old husband? I've got one too many now. I meant to say—when I've been home for awhile, I'm going to see what I can do to dispose of that one. Perhaps you can advise me?"

"Didn't you know?" cried Mary, sitting upright with a pained and slightly apprehensive expression. "Is it possible you have never heard?"

"No; I haven't heard anything. What do you mean?" Hope felt alarmed despite herself.

"About Ned—poor Ned."

Hope shook her head, unable to speak.

"He died three months ago," said Mary simply.

"Ah!" said Hope sharply, and sat down, feeling strangely befuddled, played with, and weak. "If I had known! So it was all for nothing!"

But she did not explain under Mary's gentle pressing; and they avoided the subject, with a little shiver.

Over Ned's death Hope was unable to define her true feelings—some sorrow, but only for the futility of his life and its going out.

There was, at least, no shameful sense of relief. She thought, with a shudder, of the essential brutality

of the rigid system that tried to compel all unhappy creatures in like bonds to her own to look only to death for help. How it must corrode even the finest natures; and under what strange masks morality has been miscalled and defamed.

Well, she could give all her pity to herself now. What was it she had applied to Edgerton:

"Time turns the old days to derision,
Our loves into corpses or wives,
And marriage, and death, and division,
Make barren our lives."

Yes, marriage, too; for the married closed off their lives into a little walled garden, where more than two could hardly walk with comfort. Mary's garden would be very beautifully tended; it would probably include an orchid house. Mary, herself, so dark and white and with her gold-grey eyes, would become such a setting; she had always been faintly exotic, hardily exotic, one might say. How well she would set off diamonds in that dusky hair of hers and on her quick white hands. Edgerton had chosen very well for himself. If it was he who chose! There was no disloyalty in that thought. Mary would not be meanly calculating, but she had a fine sense of the fitness of things.

"Yes," said Hope, when they had returned, after many pauses, to that topic, "you'll be quite a great lady now. Will you ask me to tea and rehabilitate me socially? What a joke!"

"I will," said Mary, her eyes sparkling. "You shall yet patronise the whole town, with my able assistance. You're a born devil, Hope, and the salt of the earth, and I love you. How soon will you come back to me? Do you return to New York?"

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do," said Hope.

"Mary, have you ever known what you were going to do?"

"Why—why—" said Mary thoughtfully, "no, not if you mean that literally. None of us do. We are not gods, you know?"

"Not even knowing good and evil?" asked Hope.

"Oh—good and evil!" Mary paused a long time. "It's not so simple as that, I don't think—you can't talk of it as if it were, say, sweet and sour! Maybe Adam and Eve did know good and evil after they ate the apple; but observe, they never explained the matter to anyone else. So might you 'if you could win to the Eden tree, where the four great rivers flow,' but you can't. No, we are not gods—and I must say, in this age, we ought to be! I can't think of a time in human history when every man and woman has been so carelessly entrusted with the charge of his own soul! It's rather a glorious experiment for humanity, but a little alarming."

"Is it?" asked Hope the radical. "Why should I be more alarmed at having charge of my own soul than at giving it in charge of someone else? If I don't know my right hand from my left, do I know enough to pick the guardian of my soul?"

"Oh, you—— Shut up," said Mary candidly. "I wasn't talking to you; I was talking to that non-existent creature, the Average Woman. I know you'll upset my theoretical apple-cart as soon as I get it nicely filled with platitudes. Consider this, as an Average Woman, you'd never have been allowed to choose that guardian—the guardian would have been chosen ages before you were born—up to a century ago——"

"And my Good and Evil would have been as much a matter of chance as it ever could be now if I came down to flipping a nickel for decisions," Hope pointed out. "Only then I'd never have questioned results,

which perhaps I might now, and so may learn something."

"My dear," said Mary, "you'd have benefited by the wisdom of the ages, embodied in law and custom."

"Fine," said Hope, "if nothing but wisdom were embodied in law and custom."

"Ah, what are we talking about?" said Mary. "You are only trying to tell me you're grown up. And I knew it, the moment I looked at you a second time. And that is all you mean to tell me. Isn't it? No, I am not asking. Plague take her; who is there?"

Mrs. Dupont it was; the news of Mary's engagement was still fresh, and she had been deluged with callers. Her surprise at seeing Hope was slightly ludicrous, since it was evident she was uncertain how great a degree of cordiality was called for. After she had congratulated Mary in a moment of confusion, she turned affably to Hope and asked:

"You have been married, too, haven't you, since we met?"

"Oh, once or twice," said Hope, and dropped her eyes demurely.

Mary coughed slightly, and with extreme gravity said:

"What've you done with them all?"

"Poisoned them," said Hope lugubriously. "Awful nuisance, don't you think? They do get under foot so."

To her surprise, Mary turned suddenly to Mrs. Dupont, with that touch of studied impulsiveness she could make so fetching, and dropped their little burlesque.

"Hope is a widow, Bessie," she said. "Perhaps you never heard that Ned Angell is dead? I knew you would be sorry. And you must congratulate Hope, not me—" smiling slightly. She went into details.

Here was something Mrs. Dupont could grasp; to Hope's great surprise, she found genuine sympathy, if not great comprehension of anything but material details, in this woman, with whom she had never been able to exchange a spontaneous word in the old days. There was something sincere about Mrs. Dupont, a certain *bonhomie*. Well, at least, she was one of those people who help one to appreciate and enjoy success.

"I shall have some gossip to carry about; I'll be very popular for a day or two," she said in parting. "Sorry you're not in town long enough to come over and see me. I shall insist on it when you return. I'm going to see Cora now."

"And tell her," added Mary. "She'll thank you."

They laughed, to the bewilderment of Hope, to whom Mary said later:

"You're even with Cora, anyway. She weighs quite two hundred and fifty now."

"She never did anything to me," said Hope.

Mary shook her head hopelessly.

"But at least," she said, "you're humanised. You'll never have right sense, of course, but you can go through the motions. You made Mrs. Dupont like you! But you'll never, never be an Average Woman. What a pity!"

CHAPTER XXIX

NO, she did not yet know what she was going to do, not even on a day in Autumn when her visit home had extended to several months. It was to find out, if possible, that she was stretched out quite by herself, prone in the grass a half-mile from the new ranch-house her father had built since her last visit home, arraigning her soul and weighing her life.

She had gone out to meet life as a brave adventure, and life had taken her captive and led her blindfold, through strange and devious ways, here to her starting point. She, that would have her will, saw now that life made beggars of the best of us, and that we can do no more than ask graciously, saving our pride so as not to cry for things denied, or, worse, for things granted. If there was any sense in it at all, any meaning, beyond that, it was past her understanding. Ready-made explanations for bargain-counter minds one found at every street corner, but she could not make them fit her individual soul, and it stood naked before her to be judged. So, seeing it on the one side and the great universe on the other, she felt she could only laugh at the disparity, and let it go in search of a better arbiter. Never having judged another, she could not do it for herself.

Having made nothing of it all, save amazement at the absurdity of her own actions and wonder at the inevitableness of them, she opened the gates of memory to all she had striven to forget for sanity's sake. Being dead, Ned's memory took on a seeming of un-

reality; in a sense, he had never been. Oddly, she could find no great regret for anything. "Things are as they must be," she remembered the words gropingly, "and will be brought to their destined end."

So her destiny awaited her still. The days when desire should fail were far from her.

Nay, destiny awaited no one, but stood always by one's side, so that one went neither to it nor from it, but with it. It walked with her here, on his wide stretch of golden grassy plain, as it had gone with her through the thronged streets and brought her to the one among five million she should choose to love. That was fatalism, perhaps; but a healthy fatalism; it avoided brooding, and invested all things with a quality and significance beyond their intrinsic value. As it had brought Nick to her, across the world, before either of them was awake to its purpose, and let them drift again for years until they had grown to understanding, when they were led again to look on each other's faces, so it had taken him from her.

By what agency? She could think of it now without that surge of revolt, of wild demanding, which made reason a mockery; though she loved him no less. That he was dead she still would not believe. He had merely gone away—something much less explicable—to Chicago? to Europe?

The impossibility of his having done both these things smote her on a sudden. So positively had she been told, her dazed mind at the time actually accepted one statement as reinforcing the other. Now they made each other absurd. There had been something, something unexpected, like that episode which threatened so menacingly down at the shore, and dissolved into nothing when confronted boldly. A word, a look, might have removed it, if she but knew the cause. And after all, she had not fought, as she promised

she would. She had left it all, and gone away weeping, like a child in a dark room. Destiny, if it had a sense of humour, might be chuckling sardonically now over her easy discomfiture. Women, she thought disgustedly, gave destiny good cause to laugh. They never did fight back; they simply sat down and cried foolishly over any misadventure. A man got up and went on. When women learned to do that, to throw away their luxury of despair, to cease taking morbid pride in their own fragility, they might also come near finding themselves liberated from many more palpable inequalities. They needed the lesson of cheerful old Sir John of the ballad: "I am a little hurt, but I am not slain!"

Well, it was time to "arise and fight again." She obeyed the thought literally, and flung out her arms in a gesture of gladness. She would go back and claim from her glittering city some of its promise, go on with her life, still follow the unknown as her father had. Find Nick, if she could. But if that might never be, she saw her life enriched through him still.

She might have asked Edgerton to help her find him, before she left New York. He would have. But it would have struck her as a little unkind, because of the things she did not know. How little we ever know!

In the light, crystalline air her vision was sharpened like her wits. Very far away, so far that not the faintest murmur of sound came to her from its thunderous progress, she saw the express from the East crawling across the face of the prairie, a line of black with wavering plumes of smoke floating pridefully backward. There was a station, a mere water-tower garnished with a stately name borrowed from overseas, within sight of the hill above the ranch-house. That was not very near, for things with-

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in sight are not near on the prairies. The sight of the train roused her to activity by an unconscious sympathy; she began walking homeward, to meet it—though with no such thought. But to see her going steadily, with that quick light step under which the grass bent and sprang again as to a small wind, one would have thought she knew the train was bringing her something. Her face was eager, her eyes alight. But again, if she had known, she would have sped like Atalanta. For now Destiny, having wearied perhaps of attending her wilful, stumbling course, was bringing her heart's desire to her.

Aboard the train, Nick, sighting the water-tower, saw instead the gates of Paradise. And whether he really won to them or not, there are few who may even see them. For Hope, she had always said, and still maintained, that the earth was very good, and Paradise could wait its turn.

THE END